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**Spirit of our Age: Dimensions of Religiosity Among  
Scottish Youth**

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## Contents

Abbreviations and Transcription	vi
Conventions	
Acknowledgement	vii
Abstract	viii
Aims and Background	1
The Reflexive Author	4
Religious Boundaries	10
<b>Chapter 1 De-Churching Society</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1 Religiosity and Youth	15
1.2 The Church Problematic	18
1.3 Accounting for Church Growth and Decline	22
1.4 Christianity and Church: A Religious Subject	27
1.5 Secularisation	30
1.6 Modernising: Secularised Denominations	34
1.7 Unchurched Youth	36
1.8 Blaming the Parents	38
1.9 Non-institutional Religiosity	42
1.10 Conclusion	45
<b>Chapter 2 Constructing Youth</b>	<b>48</b>
2.1 Youth	48
2.2 The orthodox Model of Childhood	49
2.3 Adolescence	52
2.4 Youth Cultures	57

<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>65</b>
3.1	Methodology Background	65
3.2	The Groups:	70
	Mainstream Church of Scotland	
3.3	Evangelical Church	72
3.4	The Woodcraft Folk	74
3.5	School Pupils: RME and Science	75
3.6	Reflections on Youth, Religion and Methodology	77
3.7	Research Design	85
3.8	Ethics and Negotiating Access	86
3.9	Hanging Out	88
3.10	Questionnaires	89
3.11	Focus Groups	90
3.12	Interviews	91
3.13	The Pilot	94
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Considering Religion: Something in the Background</b>	<b>95</b>
4.1	Religion: Something in the Background	95
4.2	Primary School: believing what you're told	96
4.3	Heaven: you have to be good	101
4.3i	Christians and Heaven	103
4.4	Secondary School Transition: believing what you want	104

4.5	Science and Ultimate Questions	114
4.6	Church and Sunday School: rabbiting on	116
4.7	Church-going: getting a boost	121
4.8	Public-ising Religion	123
4.9	Friends and Family: Discursive Networks	124
4.10	Keeping it in the Family	126
4.11	Other Religions	128
4.12	Conclusion	134
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Shifting Landscapes: Spirituality and Religiousness</b>	<b>139</b>
5.1	Spirituality and Religiousness	140
5.2	Parental Religiosity	141
5.3	What is Spirituality?	142
5.4	Definitional Distinctions	145
5.5	The Super in the Natural	147
5.6	Conspiratorial Angst	149
5.7	Spirituality as Less than Religion	150
5.8	Spirituality as Distinct from Religion	153
5.9	Buddhism and 'Other' religions and Spirituality	156
5.10	Spiritual Attitudes	160
5.11	Pick 'n'mix' Spirituality	169
5.12	Spirituality as Something More than Religiousness	171
5.13	Spiritual Experiences	174
5.14	Homing in on Spirituality	182
5.15	Conclusion	185

<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Common Religion: Background Noise</b>	190
6.1	Common Religion: background noise	190
6.2	Sensing and Making Sense of the Supernatural	191
6.3	Common Religion?	196
6.4	Developing Common Religion: Supernatural Elements in Folk Tradition	197
6.5	Diffuse Elements of Superstition and Supernatural Conviction	199
6.6	Specific Beliefs	203
6.6i	Ghosts and Ouija Boards	206
6.6ii	Astrology	208
6.6iii	Aliens	210
6.6iv	Life After Death	215
6.7	Religious Experience	224
6.8	How Common is Common Religion?	224
6.9	Conclusion	231
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Coming Out: Problems with Christian Identity</b>	234
7.1	Coming Out: Problems with Christian Identity	234
7.2	Identity	234
7.3	Proud to be Christian: everyone knows I'm a Christian	240
7.4	The School	247
7.5	Fitting-in and Sorting Practises	249

7.6	Everyone Mucked About: School Ethos and RME	260
7.7	The Home: speaking of Christianity	262
7.8	The Church	267
7.9	Self and Identity	277
7.10	Conclusion	284
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Reconsidering Secularisation</b>	<b>286</b>
8.1	A Neu[c]rotic Church?	286
8.2	Societalisation	289
8.3	Rationalisation	291
8.4	Ironic Reversals and Countervailing Tendencies	293
	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>x</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>302</b>

## Abbreviations

[Name of Group: INT] = Individual Interview

[Name of Group: FG] = Focus Group

## Transcription Conventions

(...) Words undeciphered

. Talk omitted which is irrelevant to the issue discussed

.

.

= Contributions follow on without a break

/ Pause of less than two seconds

// Pause of more than two seconds

**CAPITALS** Emphatic speech

[...] Interjections by unidentified speaker

(?...) Approximate wording

[...] Stage directions, e.g. *laughter*

[

[ Simultaneous or interrupted speech

(&) Continuing speech, separated in the transcript by an interrupting speaker

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis is dedicated to my family – biological and social – especially my children (Kara and Eva) who saw less of me than we would have liked during its compilation. It is also devoted to the memory of my mother from whom I inherit curiosity and stamina.

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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis has been to establish whether any form of religiosity plays a role in the lives of young people in modern Scotland. Religiosity, a derivative of religion, has generally been equated with institutional Christianity. This situation is particularly chronic in the literature addressing the notion of secularisation, a theoretical strand informing the study.

During the teenage years, research suggests that many different types of organisational activities, such as church-going are relinquished. Indeed, church attendance figures are diminishing across most age groups, but regular church-going declines dramatically during the transition between primary and secondary school, gaining full downward momentum in the mid to late teens. However, this thesis argues that it might be a mistake to deduce that at this stage of life religiosity declines in all spheres, the suggestion being that how the situation is viewed depends entirely upon what is meant by religion and religiosity. If religiosity is considered broadly, beyond the scope of institutional manifestations, facilitating a fuller engagement with people's beliefs, what at first seems to have little resonance and significance becomes more clearly discernible.

The case for more qualitative research in the sociology of religion is urged for two main reasons. Firstly, to facilitate an attempt at understanding the *meanings* actors attribute to religion and the *role* this may play in their lives. Quantitative studies are unable to reveal such complex nuances. Secondly, qualitative approaches enable a broader understanding of modern expressions of religiosity, and do not limit manifestations of religiosity to mainstream Christianity. This research explores an eclectic range of beliefs held amongst both non-church-goers and regular church-goers in Edinburgh. Whilst it is not possible to argue that these beliefs represent any sort of system, the data shows respondents engaging with what they term 'spirituality', as an array of available cultural resources predominantly during life crises, and also during more ordinary routine behaviours. Some beliefs appear to be linked to earlier beliefs held as younger children, especially during primary school exposure to Christianity.

In this thesis it is suggested that secularisation theories have generally underplayed the preponderance and significance of religion to people at both the individual and social level in modernity. Further, that the panorama of modern religiosity is best considered both within and outwith its institutional mediators.



It is an attribute of society, and I would dare to say of human nature if such an entity were to exist, to find solace and refuge in religion. The fear of death, the pain of life, need God, and faith in God, whichever of God's manifestations, for people just to go on. Indeed, outside of us, God would become homeless (Castells, 1997:12).

## i      **Aims and Background**

This study considers to what extent religiosity manifests in the beliefs and behaviours of young people and constitutes part of their worldview. The religious landscape of regular church-goers, as well as non-church-goers, were explored utilising qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis. The rationale for this approach is explained in Chapter 3: Methodology.

The research was conducted in Edinburgh, a capital city with a historical tradition of Presbyterian Christianity situated to the east of Scotland. Historically, Scotland has a strong tradition of Christianity, mainly Presbyterian, punctuated with recurrent tensions between sects, and Catholicism in particular.<sup>1</sup> More recently, however, a shift towards both religious pluralism and declining rates of participation across major Christian denominations has produced a variegated religious landscape (Melton, 1984; Wolffe, 1993; Davie, 1997).<sup>2</sup> This trend is evident throughout contemporary Britain, ranging from mainstream to more unconventional Christianity. In addition, the landscape includes the growing presence of other major religious traditions, and the eclecticism of the New Age and New Religious Movements.

In Edinburgh, open streets and spaces have become recruiting grounds for New Religious Movements and charismatic Evangelism, particularly during the summer when tourists and native folk peruse the city for 'culture'. Specialist bookshops display their wares on self-improvement techniques such as *T'ai Chi*, healing, meditation, and various other therapies. Even flourishing coffee shops have become New Age enclaves, indicated by a perusal of their vast notice boards. Similarly, skimming the local papers reveals an array of clairvoyant services, myriads of people and organisations all claiming to offer help, the ability to read the future, or less

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of this conflict see G.Walker (1996) 'Varieties of Scottish Protestant Identity' in *Scotland in The Twentieth Century*. See also I. Maver (1996) 'The Catholic Community' which explains the demographic distribution of Catholics in the west of Scotland as largely the result of Irish immigration during the nineteenth century. See also G. Parsons, (1993:6) 'Persistence, Pluralism and Perplexity' for a broader discussion of inter-denominational conflict.

<sup>2</sup> Religious pluralism increased markedly from the 1950's onwards in the wake of rising immigration. Ballard (1994) highlights the distinctions both between and within Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, and their reaction and accommodations to British culture(s).

conspicuously to provide an identity and sense of belonging. In common is their claim that control of the self, identity, and life are possible with varying degrees of individual effort: these are 'self-religions' (Heelas, 1996). By implication, their proliferation and ideologies suggest that modern ways of living are variously deficient. This concern is similarly reflected in contemporary sociological debate centering upon identity crises and increasing uncertainties within modern 'risk' societies (Beck, 1987; Bauman, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Castells, 1997).

The emphasis upon uncertainty and ideological fragmentation has led some sociologists to pronounce that the Enlightenment promises of progress and reason can no longer be sustained. Indeed, society appears so fundamentally different from previous eras that we can no longer claim to be modern, but post-modern (Lyotard, 1984; Jameson, 1991; Kumar, 1995). Theoretical positions along this vein have been most rigorously adopted and developed since the 1960's.<sup>3</sup>

One collective response to modern cultural and socio-economic shifts and uncertainties is identification with a social or religious movement. In part this represents a search for meaning, belonging and authenticity, discussed by such authors as Castells. (1997).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The rise of post-modernism(s) embraced from various theoretical perspectives, including feminism, is reflected in claims about the very nature of sociology itself. The idea of foundational general theory associated with modernity is contested as fundamentally flawed, and subjected to trenchant critical attack, culminating in a sociological impasse. Gouldner, for example, in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970) epitomises this shift, arguing that sociology has failed both morally and politically, imbibing and constructing the very ideology the discipline had set out to reveal. Advocating a reflexive sociology, Gouldner argued that sociologists must decide whose interests they represent rather than claiming masked neutrality. See Holmwood's *Founding Sociology?* (1996) for a detailed discussion of the above. Holmwood is particularly scathing of the nihilism in postmodernism: "According to Baudrillard, for example, postmodern 'social reality' is a 'chaotic constellation' which is 'unrepresentable', such that there is no such thing as the social and . . . no such thing as the individual either . . . Accordingly, social theorists should give up any quest for generality and coherence" (pp.22-23).

<sup>4</sup> There is considerable debate over the meaning of the term New Religious Movement. See Beckford (1986) for a useful discussion and also Barker, (1989). The former defines NRM's as "organised attempts to mobilise human and material resources for the purposes of spreading new ideas and sensibility of a religious nature" (Beckford, 1986:29). Similarly, identifying what constitutes a New Social Movement is not without difficulties. For a discussion of these as collective responses to risk, see Sklair (1995) pp. 495 – 512, and an earlier discussion from Melucci (1989).

As a social sphere religion has not been immune from the disturbances of the modern world. However, sociologists dispute the importance and impact of religion in modernity, maintaining that religious beliefs and practices have declined to such an extent that religion has lost its former social significance (See Martin, 1978; Wilson, 1982; Tschannen, 1991; Bruce, 1996). Debates surrounding the significance of religion have culminated in various claims associated with secularisation theories, drawing upon insights provided by classical social theorists such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber. The issue of the significance of religion in contemporary societies continues with vigour across Britain, Europe and the USA.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis is located within the secularisation debate, its arguments providing a matrix for the themes discussed. The secularisation dispute lies broadly in two camps, the operationalisation of religion inevitably informing each perspective. The central strands are considered in the introduction and re-visited in the final chapter.

As a backdrop to the thesis, the following section explores the author's reflexive interest in religiosity, marrying the personal with the academic.

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the other protagonists here are Wilson, (1988), Martin, (1978 ) Gellner, (1992); Stark and Iannacone (1994); Stark and Bainbridge, (1985) Bruce (1996).

### **The Reflexive Author: A Personal Account**

This focus of this research is to explore religiosity amongst young people in their middle teenage years. The reason for the selection of this particular age cohort centres upon their capacity to ponder on such issues as where am I going, and who am I? This is primarily because they are approaching the end of their formal school years and are therefore obliged to think about the direction that their lives will take on the termination or continuation of their education. To begin to ask and indeed answer such identity-based questions may evoke religious ways of thinking. That is, there may be recourse to a wide variety of religiosity in order to make sense of life and their place and role within society.

Religiosity as a 'cultural resource' (Beckford) is available for people to utilise in order to derive a personal sense of meaning, and perhaps direction. Specifically, most children have grown up with some experience of Christianity and church in Britain, either through school or family. Furthermore, the national school curriculum for 5-14 year olds teaches compulsory Religious and Moral Education. Thereafter, continuation of the study of the subject is entirely voluntary. The media also play a role in mediating aspects of religiosity across the nation. This can be indirect such as references to religion in standard television programmes such as 'soaps', and also in films. Or this can be more direct such as documentaries, and the recent genre of programmes that are broadcast as scientific and authoritative, relaying accounts of anomalous psychic phenomena. These are mystery programmes, which allude to various transcendent referents.

A further motivating factor for studying young people during their teenage years arose from personal experience as a teacher of Religious and Moral Education (RME) in several Scottish schools. I found that children and young adults readily embraced the accounts of mystery programmes as true and factual, suggesting the existence of an unexplained realm of psychic phenomena. In sharp contrast, however, they rejected, almost *en mass*, the study and claims of the institutional religions that they were obliged to study. The range includes Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and Christianity. The study of Christianity accounts for one third

of their lessons in RME, whilst the other world religions represent a further third between them. Pupils were opposed to the study of Christianity and felt that Christians wanted to moralise, make them account for their actions, and stop them from having fun.

The majority of pupils considered that Christianity was out of date and bore no relevance to living in modern society. Its teachings were conservative, and what is more, there was simply no evidence to suggest that God might be real. The strongest argument for this was a seeming lack of compassion in the world. If the Christian God were real, then there would not be any suffering. Clearly suffering occurs on both small scale and large-scale events, therefore God can not possibly exist.

Within their own culture, they witness the closure of churches and their conversion into pubs, offices and houses. Their parents are mainly non-believers, and there is little if any encouragement at home to attend church and imbibe Christian teachings. The few people that they did see going to church are mainly old, people of a generation with whom they felt that they had little in common with.

In the classroom, teaching of RME is compounded by pupils' overwhelming opposition against much of its content. This opposition takes the form of indiscipline, which can be overt, covert or both. Even if some of the pupils wish to pay attention in this setting, they are more often than not, distracted by other pupils' persistent forms of indiscipline. This can take a wide variety of forms from constant chatting, inappropriate laughter, throwing things, banging tables and chairs, and simply refusing to engage in any work (see Willis, 1977). Indiscipline is not confined solely to RME, it occurs right across the school in many cases, a problem that is continually highlighted in teaching literature. However, it does seem to be worse in RME, since pupils, and indeed many teachers and parents, share a similar view to the pupils themselves, that RME is a waste of time. That is, RME has a

reputation for being a 'soft' subject and lacks the status of 'hard' subjects such as english, maths and science.

This is possibly further evidence of the perceived societal irrelevance of institutional religion. I make the distinction between institutional religion and a more diverse religiosity because it appears that what is being rejected is institutional religion. Interest in what the young people described as 'spirituality' with its broad connotations, a derivative of religion, shows little sign of declining in tandem with institutional forms.

The choice of topic for this thesis then, was motivated by an interest in whether pupils really were as hostile to religion as they appeared to be in the classroom context. The research aimed to explore whether there was any form of religiosity that might interest them. In short, to ascertain the degree of religious interest in the personal lives of young people. If there was no evidence of this, then it is likely that their own children will reflect this to some extent. However, if there is evidence of interest, albeit beyond institutional forms, then this might suggest the transmission of this interest to the subsequent generation of youth.

Five groups were selected as the focus of the research. Groups were selected for three reasons. Firstly, out of ethical considerations: they were easier to contact and gain access to through the appropriate bodies. Secondly, I wished to take advantage of group dynamics in the focus group encounter; what would they say about religion in the company of peers? What would they not say? Finally, a comparison was to be drawn between these groups. I specifically selected two church groups to establish the extent of their beliefs and commitment to their religion, to ascertain the extent to which they were really religious. Or were they going to church because it was expected and had become routine? I chose an Evangelical Church and a Church of Scotland group to contrast with one another, since the former seems to be more successful at recruiting and maintaining teenagers than the latter where they are dropping out at a significant level. I wanted to explore the reasons why the



evangelical church appealed to youth when I saw such vehement opposition to Christianity in the classroom.

The other three groups included pupils choosing to study for their *Higher* in Religion, and those studying one or more *Highers* in science subjects. Not only did I wish to compare religiosity between these groups and the other groups, but also in particular I wanted to explore patterns of religiosity between the two groups above. It is often assumed for instance, that science and religion are incommensurable, and I wanted to ascertain whether this division exists amongst teenagers, looking at religiosity in very broad terms.

The final group was the Woodcraft Folk, originally established as a non-faith group, having emerged from a socialist tradition. Again, looking at religion in broad terms, I wished to explore religion with these young people, and contrast their views and behaviours with the other four groups.

The methodology was similarly broad. There was some initial participant observation at the groups' churches, schools, and Woodcraft activities. This was to familiarise myself with their actions and also to reduce a sterile research encounter from their perspective when I eventually interviewed them. This was followed up by questionnaires administered to 48 respondents. This covered topics that were broadly religious and also more secular elements such as future work and study, leisure activities and political views. Thereafter, focus groups were conducted to explore the topics in the questionnaire in more depth.

Finally, there were 26 individual interviews with respondents in the groups who elected to participate in the final stage. The interviews explored responses from both questionnaires and focus groups, and they were given the opportunity to examine their own questionnaire. This method of triangulation proved entirely beneficial to the aims of the study since new data emerged in the interviews. That is, it transpired that there were areas of discussion around religiosity that respondents had been



unwilling to divulge in the focus groups, but were happy to explore in the company of myself. This was crucial to the research, revealing concerns about religious identity and selfhood.

There has also been a more personal reflexive interest driving this research. My position in term of religion is basically agnostic. I was brought up in a single parent family and went to church at Christmas and with the Brownies for a few years, like many other girls. At primary school, I was taught that Christianity was the one true religion and we had religious assemblies every day. The format included two hymns, the Lords Prayer and a weekly Bible story with a modern day link. I believed in Jesus without question until the age of ten when I began to meet peers who laughed at me for going to brownies and believing in Jesus. This questioned my faith and it diminished.

I also have a personal interest in religion since my mother's side of the family were Romany gypsies and my sisters and I were raised believing in evil forces, fairies, superstition, especially the power of fortune telling and crystal balls. Female relatives read crystal balls for their living, and several crystal balls and statues of laughing Buddhas were scattered around my grandmother's house, along with models of horse-drawn gypsy caravans. My great grand-mother was burned in a real one when she died. That was the tradition, and she was hailed as the last great gypsy in our family. I was eight at the time. I do not think that I ever took the belief in second sight too seriously, as I never 'saw' anything but my own reflection in the crystal ball, though my mother could 'see' without the assistance of any device. Her 'experiences' frightened me enormously. However, this may have prevented a total rejection of spirituality in my life, which is why I am probably at best agnostic, though this can sometimes shift to utter rejection, and/or tenuous belief depending on life events.

I am currently more political than religious, and believe that looking at society through a Marxist lense is the most useful in terms of the present capitalist system of production, distribution and consumption. Traditionally, in sociological literature

Marxist accounts of religion have been negative and limited to the idea that it is simply an ideological instrument of oppression used by the ruling class to maintain the low status (material position) of the working class. It is an epi-phenomenon of materiality. Whilst I agree with this to some extent, religion can also serve other functions, including Marx's classic opium analogy. It can be a force for change. More importantly, given the nature of human existence to search for meaning and locate one's self ontologically, I do not perceive that religion in some form will no longer exist in the future, regardless of societal structural parameters.

In the thesis I refer to both capitalist society, and/or modernity. The two are not mutually exclusive. Modernity incorporates more breadth in terms of societal features than the term capitalism, but it is the capitalist system of oppressive relations and exploitative production that underpins these.

Secularisation theories represent the theoretical bedrock of the thesis. The theories also occur at strategic places in the thesis where they relate to the data, and in the final conclusion, Chapter 8.

Secularisation theories are accounts about major changes in society associated with modernisation, and specifically the changes in the power and scope of religion. Such theories claim the ability to account for the current position of religion in the developing world, and the West, such as Britain, where church-going rates have fallen dramatically since the 1950's. These figures are expected to continue to plummet until British churches have relatively few members. Indeed, currently, there is little interest in church from children and youth, the main church body comprising elderly females.

What differs in these theories is the timing of the demise of religion. For some this was commensurate with industrialisation, for others it was the turn of the twentieth century, or the mid-twentieth century when decline became most significant and

Christianity lost its hold at the forefront of the British mindset. The cultural shifts of the 1960's are particularly salient (Brown, 1988).

The following section examines the difficulties of arriving at a working definition of religion.

## **ii Religious Boundaries**

Religion is a nebulous term that courts controversy. This section attempts some delineation. The undertaking is required since this thesis discusses forms of religiosity that exceed historically hegemonic definitions of religion.

In academic terms, much has been made of the distinction between substantive and functional definitions of religion: the substantive defines what it is, whereas the latter emphasises what it does for the individual and the social group to which s/he belongs.<sup>6</sup> However, a generally acceptable and coherent definition of religion is problematic. The more that a particular definition is relied upon, the more subsidiary and qualifying questions arise. The question of what religion is then is broad, ambiguous, and subject to constant revision and further clarifications. This in itself illustrates the importance of social context and social construction entailed in meanings. Durkheim's attempt at a succinct definition is a case in point: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things . . ." (1976:47). This leads the reader inevitably, to consider the characteristics of the sacred. We are then obliged to contemplate the meaning of this term.

Byrne points out that religion as a descriptive category is a recent enterprise in European thought (1988: 4). Indeed, all definitions are social constructs affected by

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<sup>6</sup> See Berger, P., 'Substantive Definitions of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13 (1974:125-33) for a comprehensive debate concerning the meanings of religion.

historical context. Geertz (1966) emphasises the aspect of social construction (and perhaps an unwitting cultural bias)<sup>7</sup> and presents a segmented definition:

(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 1966).

Consider also the following from Radin's *Primitive Religion* (1957) which admits at the outset the difficulty in arriving at a definition. Radin's definition is interesting because he examines 'primitive' religion, often berated by missionaries and Christian explorers when they began to explore other cultures, interpreting these according to their own cultural frameworks:<sup>8</sup>

To describe the nature of religion is extremely difficult. Obviously it means different things to different people. We may safely insist, however, that it consists of two parts: the first an easily definable, if not precisely specific feeling; and the second certain specific acts, customs, beliefs, and conceptions associated with this feeling. The belief most inextricably connected with the specific feeling is a belief in spirits outside of man and as controlling all those elements in life upon which he lays most stress (Radin, 1957:3).

On this basis, to explore any manifestations of religiosity (a derivative of religion) in the worldviews of young people, the researcher is obliged to consider both the feeling aroused in individuals which may be described as religious, and the extent to which this is linked with their beliefs and behaviour. Whilst Radin's definition may seem satisfactory in certain respects, particularly in its association of religion with feeling, there are problems with the latter part of his definition; and certainly with his almost

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<sup>7</sup> See Saler (1997) on the accusation from Talal Asad (1996) against Geertz's definition of religion as culturally loaded (1997:45).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Evans-Pritchard (1929) imbued with a Christian worldview interprets *Witchcraft amongst the Azande* in purely functionalist terms. See also Said's *Orientalism* in which he castigates the imposition of British categories upon the 'oriental' other.

qualifying statement on spirits. Wittgenstein's concept of 'game' proves a useful analogy at this point (1958, 1969).<sup>9</sup>

Wittgenstein summarised the difficulty in defining game and the general vagueness of many words. Attempting to evaluate whether some 'thing' is common to all games proves unsatisfactory because not all games have features common to others, hence "[i]f *all* games had all of these characteristics [that games typically have], and *only* games did, then the word 'game' would have a unitary meaning" (Wittgenstein, 1958: I.66; also cited in Pitcher, 1964: 220). Unfortunately, there is not one clearly defining characteristic, rather a cluster of game characteristics  $C_1$  to  $C_N$ , and it is not required that each game has all of them, but an unspecified number of these characteristics. Indeed, "it might well be that some activities that have only three game-characteristics are without doubt games, and that others which have five are not" (ibid. 220). This family resemblance approach allows for a less bounded definitional direction without conceding that all things are religious.

Bearing in mind the quorum feature of language (Hospers, 1989:71), for some thing to count as religion/religiosity, requires that an unspecified number of characteristics be in the set ( $R_1$  to  $R_N$ ) of that which we choose to term religion. The problem with trying to define religion is that "when we define words by using other words . . . those words are usually vague themselves. We can define "X" [religion] in terms of the characteristics A, B, and C, but it may not be clear what exactly constitutes the possession of characteristics, A, B, and C" (ibid., 75), or Radin's acts, customs, beliefs, spirits, and Durkheim's sacred: "ostensive definitions . . . [only] point out *instances* of the application of a word, but no amount of ostensive definition will tell us what the exact boundary-lines are" (Pitcher, 1964: 76).

Whilst it is impossible to irrefutably define terms such as game, crucially people know what is and is not a game; for example, monopoly is and an orange is not. By the same token, any definition of religion needs to be broad enough to include

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<sup>9</sup> A similar analogy has been used elsewhere, for example, in P. Byrne's article, 'Religion and the Religions' in *The World's Religions*. See also more recently Elliott-Guthrie, 'What is Religion?' (1996).

elements and expressions of experience and beliefs that are, in essence, other-worldly (that is, allude to belief in a supernatural power); and not so broad as to include political ideologies.

Acknowledging the futility of a precise definition of religion, this research is premised upon the respondents' common-sense understandings of religion. This approach is favoured by Bruce, depicting religion substantively as "beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose" (1996:7). However, this definition does not allow for serious engagement with general, privatised religiosity, the topic of this research. In contrast, Towler's extensive category of common religion (1973) allows for greater breadth, and also the potential for progression and change without defining all things as religious. Common religion incorporates a broad range of religiosity outwith mainstream Christianity: superstition, the supernatural, the paranormal, magic and astrology. As an analytical tool, however, the approach has been marginal to sociology, not least because of the expense that a large-scale study of this nature would incur, but primarily due to conflicting definitions of religion and secularisation theory.

Admittedly then, at the study's inception inherent difficulties in defining terms such as religion have been stressed. In particular, language is limited in describing something in religious terms. There is a need therefore, to recognise that religion means different things to different people.

This thesis is an open inquiry that seeks to understand and inform the reader about modern features of religiosity and the role this can assume in the worldviews of young people. Refusing to restrict religion to precise boundaries confers considerable flexibility to the study. This approach also facilitates an understanding of respondents as active agents, rather than subjects determined entirely by social structural constraints. The rationale for studying young people and religiosity is outlined at the beginning of the following chapter – De-churching Society.



The first chapter also considers current church-going trends, moving on to reflect upon the church as an example of an institutional expression of religion, and followed by a discussion of secularisation. In Chapter 2, the social construction of youth is considered together with the implications of viewing children and young people from the perspective of childhood, and the way this has altered historically. Thereafter, the chapter on methodology is presented. This justifies the qualitative approach to data collection, broadly introducing the respondents and the rationale for selecting them. In addition, this furnishes the reader with detailed information about the location and activity that the respondents engaged in, since context is an important consideration, “a means of situating action” (Dey, 1993:32).

Chapter 4 details the meanings attributed to religion amongst respondents. This provides a frame of reference for the following chapters. The first of these concerns spirituality and its connotations for respondents (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 focuses upon an under-researched category, common religion, and considers its use value in relation to the data. Immediately following, a discussion of identity is presented, focusing upon the management of Christian identity amongst young people in the school, the home and in church (Chapter 7). This is informative, not least because this represents an increasingly marginal identity amongst young people. Finally, the concluding chapter further clarifies the findings, drawing out the implications of the data in relation to religiosity and secularisation theories.

## Chapter 1: De-churching Society

### 1.1 Religiosity and Youth

The impetus to studying young people (15 – 17 year olds) and the role of religiosity in their worldviews arose for several reasons. Firstly, the tendency to downplay the social significance of religion by secularisation theorists as religiosity competes with alternative and seemingly rational worldviews. A substantive issue is the decline in church membership – particularly amongst younger age-groups – suggesting strongly that religion is deemed irrelevant to most peoples' lives in contemporary Britain. During the teenage years, religiosity where it specifically relates to church-going declines significantly for a considerable majority of young people: some never attended, others cease going, and many have already relinquished any church affiliation before the teenage years commence (discussed in Chapter 2 and 4).

This is institutionalised religion, however. Alongside, lies a variety of non-institutional religiosity, largely neglected. Such disregard is raised in Luckmann's *Invisible Religion* (1967), where he criticises institutional interpretations of religion and the focus on church attendance statistics as myopic measures of religiosity. In support of this criticism, Wuthnow (1989) has drawn attention to the modern panoply of American non-institutional religiosity as fairly widespread, individualistic and worthy of study:

The religion practised by an increasing number of Americans may be entirely of their own manufacture – a kind of eclectic synthesis of Christianity, popular psychology, *Reader's Digest* folklore and personal superstitions, all wrapped in the anecdotes of the individual's biography (1989:116-117).

Secondly, research centering upon youth tends to focus excessively upon particular spheres: school, leisure and the family. Literature pertaining to religion and youth is



sparse, and research that does exist tends to regard young people in developmental terms, contrasting them with apparently rational adults.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, a statement uttered by a member of a leading rock band spurred this study.<sup>11</sup> The band provoked outrage, particularly amongst church leaders, when in echoing a similar expression by John Lennon some three decades previously, they alluded to “being bigger than God”. This provocative proclamation invites a response, for *Oasis* symbolise, albeit temporarily, a sense of hedonism and market consumerism for youth-led cultures. This lends a moral angle to the research, particularly in the British context where recurrent moral panics associated with young people arise.<sup>12</sup> These emanate from a perception of increasing social problems such as rising youth criminality, suicide attempts, and excessive risk taking behaviour. These represent some of the salient issues discussed regularly amongst officials, politicians, and reported extensively in the media. There is also acute anxiety associated with escalating indiscipline within schools, leading to increased calls for an enhanced emphasis upon teaching standardised social values to produce the ‘good citizen’. Indeed, a perception of movement from child to adult gauges the good citizen as its end product.

If childhood is considered as a social construct, the moral angle is more comprehensible. Childhood has been shaped and reshaped with particular emphases throughout history. All constructions and re-constructions

. . . have shared the intention to identify the existence of ‘childhood’; to define the desirable state of ‘childhood’ to incorporate the concept into a larger philosophy concerning the meaning of life; and to control ‘childhood’, whatever its nature (Hendrick in James and Prout, 1997:59).

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<sup>10</sup> See James and Prout (1997) for a trenchant criticism of the bipolar childhood socialisation approach.

<sup>11</sup> *Scotland on Sunday*, 19.09.99.

<sup>12</sup> In a classic work, Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1973) suggests that: “Societies appear to be subject every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned [sic] by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions”. See also Pearson, (1983) *Hooligan* for a similar perspective.

Young people are often viewed with suspicion, distrust and apprehension, a concern documented in historical sources. Commonly referred to as adolescents, they are often scape-goated and criticised for exhibiting views and behaviour deemed unacceptable to mainstream values. Churches voice their apprehensions in this area, and authors such as Francis and Kay (1996) urge the necessity for young people to be incorporated into Christianity with its concomitant morality for the benefit of self and society. The intended end-products of church 'socialisation' would be 'good' citizens with a clear sense of morality, direction in life, and eschatological hope.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, social science frames the study of youth in problem solving terms, a perspective also informing the study of religion. With this in mind, research drawing upon the connectedness of both themes produces an interesting combination. For instance, pertinent issues pivot on themes of morality and meaninglessness in the absence of religion, as well as a pronounced emphasis upon church decline and its concomitant implications for youth and society.

In this thesis, the idea that young people seek broadly religious explanations of life events is explored. It is suggested that there is a longing to glean intense meaning from life and that many people are sensitive to feelings of religiosity, searching for answers that science cannot answer, and/or thought had answered.<sup>14</sup> Science however, continues to be accorded considerable authority, and this is "in spite of some disenchantment . . . because of consequences for which some hold it responsible, such as hydrogen bombs and pollution" (Chalmers, 1992: xv).

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<sup>13</sup> Producing 'good citizens' is a stated aim of the 1988 Education Reform Act, and not only of concern to churches. *The National Curriculum for Citizenship* was published at the end of last year, a further attempt to instil morals and values such as responsibility, into children and young people. This will become a statutory subject in 2002 (see *The Guardian*, 15.2.00), 'The new citizens' David Crace; also 'The new Givers' which discusses active voluntary community work for children, Tony Blair, *The Guardian*, 1.02.00.

<sup>14</sup> See Beck, (1987), and Adams, (1995) for example. They explore the idea of risk society. In particular Beck berates the incompetencies of 'science' with its claims to absolute knowledge and control. More importantly, he emphasises the dimension of social construction in knowledge and science. Historically this has been downplayed and there has been little challenge to scientific claims of objectivity.

Modernity has facilitated scientific advancements that have improved the material conditions for many people, but at a cost. The unpredictability and distrust of 'experts' is increasingly apparent as Beck demonstrates (1987). For some people, dissatisfaction with life's uncertainties may provoke an inner search for certainty. This attempt at locating certainty, at least some of the time, can be accessed through beliefs and behaviours allied to religiosity, either collectively or individually.

British teenagers have been born into a society that no longer demands compulsory God-fearing and churchgoing.<sup>15</sup> This being the case, how do young people attempt to make sense of life and derive meaning in a society in which seemingly myriad lifestyle choices and worldviews proliferate? Some social scientific literature suggests that amidst the turmoil and angst of modernity, identity has become increasingly salient and more problematic than ever before.. The following section presents the facts of former and recent church decline. Some responses from churches and relevant studies are also considered.

## **1.2 The Church Problematic**

British church statistics (attendance and membership), particularly amongst younger age groups, point to a significant downward trend. Membership in the Church of Scotland, for example, has declined dramatically from 1,280,620 in 1931, to 660, 954 in 1997, providing a clear indication that church-going is more of a minority pursuit than at any previous time. Similarly, figures pertaining to school-aged children have decreased over the same period. In modernity this difference is especially pronounced when figures for the 1980's and 1990's are compared: in 1981 there

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<sup>15</sup> The concept of Britishness is currently a widely contested area, centering upon identity in both academic and popular cultural realms,. See for example, 'The Disappearance of Britishness' D. Brindle, *The Guardian* 1.2.00. See Neil Davidson (2000) for an erudite discussion of the historical interplay between Britishness and Scottishness (especially chapter 2, 4 and 8). By British, I refer to its geographical boundaries and the decline in hegemony that Christianity once wielded within these parameters.

were 1,190, 787 children on Church of Scotland rolls, falling to 779,261 by 1997.<sup>16</sup> Some caution is advised however, in the interpretation of these statistics – a concern documented by Bruce – since: “as far back as we have records, the Church of England and the Church of Scotland have had far more people on their rolls than have attended church” (1996: 29). Real figures may actually be much lower.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1            Comparative Scottish Church Statistics from 1931 – 1997**

<b>Years</b>	<b>1931</b>	<b>1961</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1997</b>
<b>Congregations</b>	<b>2,270</b>	<b>2,212</b>	<b>1,668</b>	<b>1,604</b>
<b>Total on Rolls</b>	<b>1,280,620</b>	<b>1,292,617</b>	<b>770,217</b>	<b>660,954</b>
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>4,842,980</b>	<b>5,178,490</b>	<b>5,100,000</b>	<b>Figures not available</b>
<b>Baptisms</b>	<b>38,777</b>	<b>50,387</b>	<b>16,741</b>	<b>12,156</b>
<b>Total Admissions</b>	<b>94,570</b>	<b>78,497</b>	<b>24,370</b>	<b>14,331</b>
<b>Total Removals</b>	<b>88,045</b>	<b>87,160</b>	<b>40,940</b>	<b>33,359</b>

**Figures taken from *Church of Scotland Reports 1998 ‘Comparative Statistics from 1931-1997’* (1998:1/23). Total Admissions includes by profession, certificate or resolution. Total Removals includes by death, by certificate or resolution.**

<sup>16</sup> These figures are taken from *The Church of Scotland: Reports to the General Assembly*, and include persons on church rolls (1998: section 1/23).

<sup>17</sup> Such figures provide semi-portals of insight into church-going trends, but are problematic. For instance, the ways in which particular church bodies define ‘membership’ varies. Also, we are faced with the difficulty of not knowing how closely ‘members’ are involved with actual church activity.

Table 1 above illustrates the decline of Church of Scotland congregations and baptisms, church admissions and removals alongside total population. Between 1931 and 1961, numbers fall sharply, though the number of congregations remain marginally consistent until the 1970's (not shown). The 1990's show considerable decline in all areas, highlighting the increasingly marginal status of the activity of church-going.

Since this thesis is based upon research conducted in Edinburgh, the recent annual decline in communicants is illustrated in Table 2. This shows a pattern reflected across other Scottish Presbyteries.

**Table 2            Decline within the Presbytery of Edinburgh**

Presbytery	Congregations	On roll December 1996	On roll December 1997	Increase or Decrease
Edinburgh	89	50,208	48,582	-1,626

**Figures taken from *Church of Scotland Reports 1998 (1/20)*. The net loss of communicates from all Scottish Presbyteries over the same period amounts to -19,028.**

Many people perceive church decline as problematic. Various foci have been blamed for declining church enthusiasm, and various strategies adopted in an attempt to alleviate declining membership rates. One of the more controversial attempts has been the rave-style mix of church and club.<sup>18</sup> Recently, the Church of England has attempted to establish precisely which features of church people most dislike.<sup>19</sup> The Church of Scotland is similarly concerned about declining membership, inaugurating schemes such as ‘Teenbus’ to attract youth; involvement in ‘Alpha’ type projects and

<sup>18</sup> See Redhead, S. (1993) *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*; Rietveld, H. (1993) for a discussion of the appeal, impact and symbolism of raves within youth cultures.

more recently, establishing gender projects to assess the level of female involvement in church life, particularly amidst higher ecclesiastical echelons.<sup>20</sup>

Even in the nineteenth century – often considered a deeply religious period in British history – concern about church membership is evident. Indeed, whilst the mid-nineteenth century witnessed a boom in church building between 1800 and 1851, the percentage of the population attending actually fell. This has been accounted for by Gill (1993) who has proposed the over-provision of churches thesis: too many were built and were therefore unable to achieve full membership levels. Prior to Gill, other sources had revealed that churchgoing was never as widespread as is commonly believed. For example, in England during the same period, those aged fifteen and over attending Easter communion fell from an already low level of 8.1%. Similarly, the 1851 census revealed that only half of the 5-15 age group had been attending Sunday school (K. Thompson, 1985:132). The same census also revealed that churchgoing was higher in rural areas, indicating a link between urbanisation and decline (Levitt, 1996:6). Horace Mann, the census commentator was so vexed about the low proportion of church attendees as to proclaim the following:

The present rate of church-and chapel increase brings before our view the prospect, at no distant period, of a state of things in which there will be small deficiency of structures where to worship, but a lamentable lack of worshippers (cited in Golby, 1992:43).

Furthermore, “it is evident that absence from religious worship is attributable *mainly* to a genuine repugnance to religion itself” (*ibid.*, 44). The Victorians then, like many

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, see ‘Dress code divides men of the cloth’ Ruth Gledhill, 2.03.00, *The Times*, and 01.03.00 Ruth Gledhill, *The Times*. These articles report vague explanations, though the consensus is that many people consider the church as boring and old-fashioned.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Teenbus’ is an inter-denominational project aimed at children and youth. The bus travels to Urban Priority Areas and children are encouraged to speak about local and personal issues. ‘Alpha’ is primarily an Evangelical initiative designed to persuade people to visit their local church and ask questions. This originated as a learning course in basic Christianity amongst Evangelicals. Its popularity has convinced many denominations to adopt similar courses to encourage church-going behaviour. See *The Independent* 17.9.98. *Thursday Review* ‘God’s Own Spin Doctor’ Richard Askwith. Also, ‘Now God is Cool’ Sue Arnold, *The Observer Review*, 11.6.00. The latter suggests that 7,000 churches in Britain from a wide range of denominations run these courses to appeal to the younger generation. The Gender Attitude Project aims for churches to be less exclusivist and more inclusive towards women at higher levels. Research is currently commissioned to assess gender needs.



contemporary commentators were seriously concerned about the decline in church attendance.

Such figures, however, must be treated with caution. Factors such as historical, denominational, demographic, regional and social differences, 'double-sitting', all affect the compilation of church attendance and membership indices. Nevertheless, despite differences in interpretation, and regardless of the fact that many people did not routinely attend church, historically the mind-set of the British population was permeated with Christianity as a system of ideas through which to make sense of the world. Allied to the Christian perspective was a mixture of traditional folk beliefs and superstition that the church competed with and sometimes incorporated into its rituals.<sup>21</sup> There was no authoritative alternative other than that offered by religion and superstitious elements through which to make sense of the world and locate the self ontologically. In comparison, modernity offers seemingly endless choices, including an extensive range of denominations and sects. The following section explores reasons for the decline in church attendance, and also considers some areas of growth.

### **1.3 Accounting for Church Growth and Decline**

It is significant that mainstream churches have declined most dramatically, whilst independent churches and others, such as Pentecostal churches have grown. Most evidence recording and supporting this comes from America.<sup>22</sup> These trends were anticipated in Bibby's (1978) study of North America, and demonstrates further that church attendance rates are declining in many developed parts of the world – decline is not entirely a British phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> Conservative churches are more successful in maintaining and increasing their numbers. Bibby has suggested several explanations

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<sup>21</sup> For details see K.Thompson, (1985), and also Giddens (1991:194-195).

<sup>22</sup> Gill suggests that there has always been a limited compilation and accessibility of survey data on religion in Britain, whereas in the US, Gallup has collected data about religious belief on a regular basis (1998: 507).

for this, prompted by ideas posed previously by Kelley (1972, 1978). Their ideas remain relevant in the context of current church youth participation, and continue to fuel debate.<sup>24</sup>

Kelley argued that conservative churches have grown because their type of Christianity provides people with answers to ultimate questions about the meaning of life. Further, that they are characterised by a seriousness that commands considerable depth of personal commitment. In contrast, Bibby subsequently identified three primary factors to account for greater conservative growth: birth and religious socialisation, 'switching' between churches, and the maintenance of a high level of participation. Crucially, he countered, Christians from mainstream churches are failing to adequately religiously socialise their young and are losing more members to conservatives than are being gained.

In addition, Bibby objected to Kelley's assertion of the centrality of the 'ultimate-answer' seriousness attributed to conservative churches, and doubted whether this really had much of an impact on unchurched people.<sup>25</sup> He maintained that ultimate answers are not viable factors in attracting converts, but are only valid in relation to people already in a Christian community.

Bibby's dismissal of Kelley may have been rather hasty, however, and provokes such questions as whether or not non-church-goers feel they already have answers to ultimate questions, will never have the answers, or whether ultimate questions converge around consumerism or something equally less transcendent. One possibility is that many non-church-goers are interested in ultimate questions, and that some might therefore, be attracted to churches which present (apparently)

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, by the 1930's there was such anxiety as to have provoked talk of a 'crisis in Protestant Europe' (Keller and Stewart, 1927:19).

<sup>24</sup> See Perrin *et al.*, (1997) *JSSR* 'Re-examining the Source of Conservative Church Growth' for a recent discussion.

<sup>25</sup> The concept of an *unchurched* individual can appear problematic when we consider just how much influence Christianity has exerted upon culture. Most people, during childhood at least, will have attended church at some point: Christmas, a funeral or wedding, for example. When the authors here refer to unchurched, they are specifically referring to those who do not come from a regular church attending background in order to worship God.



definitive answers – or in Taylor’s terms a firm moral framework (1989). Conversely, others may seek answers to these questions elsewhere.

Amongst ‘outsiders’ drawn to churches, Bibby claims they show no preference for conservatives over mainliners. It is unclear therefore, which factors might motivate an individual in her church selection. Locality may be important in terms of church type initially attracted to, but ultimately this may not be significant. Bibby suggests that internal factors and the dynamics of a church play a key role in the decision about whether to maintain membership. Certainly, this particular thesis cannot provide an unqualified resolution here, since the church-attending respondents were initially taken by their parent(s) at an early age. Nevertheless, what goes on at their church does seem to make a difference to their perceptions and likely continuation of attendance. For example, whether friends attend, and whether they like the Minister/Elders. Other research also suggests that motivation for sustained church involvement arises from the participation itself and relationships with others in the church (Hoge, 1982).

An emphasis upon church life itself in generating motivational factors appears to be crucial. In pursuing this angle, all those concerned with lack of teenage participation could identify factors associated with the retention of the younger age group. A profitable starting point may be to allow those already involved to be more intimately involved in the church agenda, to change its profile perhaps. For example, in this study the Evangelical church provides a very clear forum and social hierarchy for children and young people: they are always involved at some level. In contrast, the mainstream church, though rather fundamentalist in its teachings, operates on a similar model to other mainstream churches. It lacks a distinct social forum for children and young people, which can militate against feelings of inclusivity.

Willis poses a question that has resonance in this context, highlighting a position returned to subsequently:

Is it now time to speak . . . of 'post-institutionalism'? – that is, the recognition that institutions may be increasingly irrelevant . . . If existing institutions do not work, that is, do not attract, then they should not be artificially propped up or multiplied . . . The identity-making and meaning-making activities of common culture have engulfed and gone beyond the cultural scope of our inherited institutions. Crudely: cultural institutions and cultural policy-makers can no longer pretend to know better than the style, fashion, media and music industries what young people want (1990:56).

Neither Bibby nor Kelley appear to have considered this as an option, though their optimism for future church growth is cautious. Bibby, for instance, concludes that

[b]arring the rejuvenation of salient functions on the part of the church-like, mainline denominations, one would expect that the trend of superior church growth will continue, while at the same time in reality touching only a minority of Canadians and Americans (Bibby, 1978:137).

This is an important point since it appears that membership levels of conservative churches continue to grow, as Scottish statistics similarly confirm.<sup>26</sup> Two points require clarification here. Firstly, in the Scottish context it is not all together clear whether this growth is at the expense of mainstream churches (switching), or what percentage is comprised of people new to the Christian community. Current church statistics do not reveal this information and it would take a large-scale study to determine. However, Bruce's (1996:163) claim that defections (switching) do *not* account for greater conservative growth seems unsubstantiated in the absence of clear substantive evidence. Secondly, Scottish statistics do attest to the same overall pattern identified by Bibby: church membership levels are increasing within conservative churches, but growth taken as aggregate is *not* particularly significant alongside general population figures.

Having studied the effects upon Christian attitudes in Church of England schools, Levitt (1996) doubts whether current membership statistics among

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<sup>26</sup> Brierley estimates that conservative churches (with 'other churches' as a group), have grown by 3,500 members to a total of 22, 400 between 1990 and 1994 (1995: 17). Again, we need to exercise caution in interpreting these statistics. All were based on church attendance on one 'typical' Sunday. Moreover, different denominations have distinct criteria they apply to what constitutes a member, and a regular member.

Evangelical/conservative churches across Britain can be sustained, given the ongoing descent of churchgoing. By contrast, an optimistic Archdeacon of York is guilty of wishful thinking, suggesting that “some Evangelical churches are so full that they are ‘church-planting’ in other areas to encourage future expansion”.<sup>27</sup> However, this view is overly optimistic; such churches are encountering serious difficulties with membership and recruitment.

Regardless of denomination, fundamental concerns amongst Christians are membership levels, particularly amongst youth. The significance to all concerned churches is that they are failing to entice and sustain new members with little or no previous church allegiance. It should be noted, however, that difficulty in sustaining membership levels amongst youth is also encountered amongst a wide range of youth organisations requiring commitment (Holden, 1989).<sup>28</sup> The urge for institutions to ‘give up’ from Willis earlier, seems a rather drastic form of action, however. But, allowing young people to become more involved on their own terms, since they know better what they want, may go some way towards the provision of viable alternatives.

The Bibby-Kelly debate shares the Stark and Bainbridge assumption that religion meets a human universal need (1985). Castells (1997) is also of this persuasion, as the opening quote to this thesis suggests. From this perspective, conservative churches are more successful because they are offering the most sought after product – clear, definitive answers. However, as Bruce points out, if this was the primary motivator, switching would be occurring between liberal and conservative churches. Bruce evinces that “[c]onservative Protestantism survives . . . by keeping its children within the faith. Liberalism declines because its children become indifferent to it”

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Simon Austin in *The Guardian*, 10. 2. 97.

<sup>28</sup> Hendry *et al*, 1993 (in Levitt, 1996 ::6) claim that participation in all structured activities is declining amongst both sexes, particularly from the age of 14 onwards. Similarly, a survey exploring leisure needs amongst 12-17 year olds in an Edinburgh UPA revealed that they had no desire to participate in structured activities. They prefer variety and autonomy and do not want to commit themselves to regular attendance. Sociability seems to be more important than the activity itself (Coalter and Allison, 1995).

(1996:163). Unfortunately, British studies in this area are lacking so this debate remains inconclusive and open to unsubstantiated interpretations. What is clear, however, is the importance of individual church life itself in motivating regular attendance. Additionally, other social spheres play strategic roles in the individual's decision to attend church. The school for example, which teaches religiosity within a distinct subject boundary.

#### **1.4 Christianity and Church: A Religious Subject?**

In Religious and Moral Education (RME) classes, children and young people are encouraged to explore ultimate questions in the context of a pluralistic curriculum offering several different perspectives. All answers are ambiguous and provisional not least because of the multi-faith emphasis, and the teachers' reluctance to ally herself with a particular perspective in a bid towards 'objectivity'. This confusing situation has a large degree of fit in an era of apparently relativistic values and truths.<sup>29</sup> The interest children show in relation to ultimate questions demonstrates that non-church attenders do reflect upon such issues, one corollary being that if conservative churches are in the business of providing definitive answers, then at some point, some of these children and young people might be predisposed toward attending these churches as Kelley contends (1972). Of course, other factors also play a crucial role in their decision to attend and in their motivations towards becoming members.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Muslims periodically challenge the centrality of Christianity in the R.M.E. curriculum, and its multi-faith aspect, urging parents to consider the extent to which this confuses children (*Church Times*, 26.1.96.). Berger (1980) argues that multi-culturalism de-legitimises religion. Taylor on a similar theme is instructive: "... Not to have a framework is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless. The quest is thus always a quest for sense" (1989:17). Levitt similarly stresses this point (1996:47).

<sup>30</sup> Whilst Giddens is hardly concerned with religion in his compositions on late modernity, he considers ontological security as crucial for humanity, and trust as fundamental to dealing with existential anxiety endemic to the modern condition (1991), much as therapies, or relationships with others. These are central human issues, negotiated across different denominations, sects and new religious movements. This perspective is applied more stringently by Stark and Bainbridge who argue that people have needs which can only be met by religion (1985), a standpoint discussed in more depth subsequently.

Like other denominations, the Catholic church is concerned about substantial decline, particularly since the 1970's, though in Scotland the level of attrition is exceeded by the Church of Scotland. One Catholic study confirmed that many urban children are disaffected with church by the age of thirteen. The report implies that schools ought to play a more positive role in this respect, particularly in their approach to Religious Education (Gaine, 1975). The influence of R.M.E. upon Christian, Muslim and secular attitudes is a recurring theme. Francis (1989) is a prolific researcher in this field, and found surprisingly that Anglican schools make little difference in fostering positive attitudes towards Christianity. By contrast, Roman Catholic schools conveyed more positive attitudes.

Gaine's (1975) study explored aspects of disenchantment amongst youth and Catholicism, holding science to account for removing much of the former credibility of religion. The general impact of science upon religion is disputed, however. For instance, positions such as those expounded by Mol, posit religion and science as coterminous, urging the latter as a natural progression of the former with a concomitant emphasis upon order (Mol, 1976:9-11). Gaine's research also suggests that a major problem with Christianity is that it is conservative and traditionalist, whereas capitalist technology is future oriented, dynamic and innovative. Christianity is thereby compelled to compete with other forms of consumption lifestyles. These offer more immediate gratifications in which "the ideology of consumerism promises the good life, good feelings and good selfhood . . . allowing alternative identities and provid[ing] gratifications to the self" (Langman, 1992: 47).

The impact of school life upon religiosity, and Christianity specifically, is largely negative or at the very least banal. It is within the modern educational institution that many children and young people experience their first taste of Christianity, seasoning later perceptions. Considerations of the impact of this sphere are therefore essential and potentially illuminating in light of this study. One respondent, for example, voiced an astute and typical observation about the status of RME in schools:

*Dan [RS: FG]: I think the fact that only five people have chosen RE in the whole of this school shows something. Like, you look at a science class, it's packed.*

Participation in compulsory R.M.E. is associated with a substantial degree of boredom according to respondents, despite the introduction of 'other' world religions to broaden its range and an effort to reflect multi-culturalism in British society. All respondents in this study believe that R.M.E. ought to be taught, with reasons ranging from tolerance of other beliefs, to allowing people the opportunity to choose from a wide selection of beliefs.

Amongst church-goers, negative views of R.M.E. emerge primarily because teaching their way of life as a subject of study emphasises difference. This is discussed in considerable detail in Chapter 7. In contrast, Francis and Kay contend that weekly church-goers are more favourably disposed to R.M.E. than their non-church-going counterparts (1996:191). However, they suggest that

Pupils who have followed a religious education syllabus which concentrates on world religions record a significantly less positive attitude toward Christianity than pupils who followed religious education syllabuses which concentrate on Christianity and the Bible (1996:154).<sup>31</sup>

The subject is rarely taken at examination level; respondents argued that it would not assist them in their future employment trajectories, a central concern of young people. Attitudes to R.M.E. are discussed in more detail subsequently, but at this juncture it is noted that a major worldly concern of teenagers is employment. Getting a 'good job' is extremely important to them, as is their self image. The concern about getting a good job amongst youth on the verge of leaving school features strongly in other research.<sup>32</sup> Whilst concern with self-image causes anxiety for many

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<sup>31</sup> This is peculiar when we consider that their 1989 study found quite clearly that Anglican schools do not produce children with a more positive attitude to Christianity, despite the popularity of these schools.

<sup>32</sup> See MINTEL Market Research (1995) draws attention to problems experienced by young people in the nineties. The major findings were not having enough money to live on, followed by concerns about finding a 'good job'. There was also concern expressed about relationships, indicating that



young people, getting a good job is paramount. With the changing nature and structure of work in an era of intensifying uncertainty, the search for satisfying employment assumes a sense of urgency for many people. Allied to this, the development of identity and meaning beyond the formal realm of employment is increasingly alienating, particularly since creativity, power and any form of control of the work process are progressively removed.

Fewer young people attend church and Sunday school in Scotland than at any previous time since records of attendance began. Experience of both is more likely to occur at Primary School age for most children, a theme returned to in Chapter 4. Schools are social spheres in which respondents sample Christianity, experiences that nourish later perceptions.

## **1.5 Secularisation**

“There is perhaps no single concept in the study of religion that is more central, more contentious, and more confusing” (Demerath and Williams, 1992:189).

The central theme throughout secularisation theories is the extent to which Christianity has relinquished power and control over people’s lives. To the non-Christians, who vehemently objected to any authority the church might claim to have (for example, publicising views on homosexuality), Christianity does not (and ought not) exert any influence in modern societies. In addition, even some of the regular church-attenders were less inclined than others to accept institutional authority, evidenced for example, in their moral behaviour (see Simon and Samantha Chapter 5). This loss of authority in terms of social scope and breadth represents one of the primary facets of secularisation theories. We might also note, however, that

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males worried more than females about intimate relationships. The research also found increase in concern with self image and the idea of the necessity of a streetwise attitude, concluding that life is becoming harder for young people. See also the TES, 18.4.97. (S. Young) features a report about 14 – 19 year olds as the most disillusioned youth. These studies contrast sharply with the assertion from a former minister saying “there has never been a better time to be a young person than in the Britain of 1996” C. Hendry, *The Guardian*, 26.8.96.

opposition to authority amongst young people is endemic to wider society and not confined to the church.

The theories of secularisation parallel specific characteristics of modernisation. Although the features of secularisation are not uniform but particularistic, broad inter-societal patterns can be discerned that rest upon three core concepts: differentiation, rationalisation and worldliness. Disagreement, however, continues to reign over the precise meaning and extent of secularisation. To clarify the debate, Tschannen (1991) has developed a systematisation of secularisation theories based upon some of the main protagonists. Amongst the more prominent are Wilson, (1966); Berger, (1969); Fenn (1970); Luckmann, (1967), and Martin (1978). Other key players are also discussed.

To commence, consideration is conferred upon Bruce (1996), the current leading player and advocate of secularisation theory in the British camp. His ideas conflict with authors such as Finke (1992), and Stark and Iannoccone (1994), who argue most stringently that, in the USA at least, secularisation has *not* occurred and the term ought to be abandoned. Finally, working towards the conclusion, insights from the data are reflected on and their degree of congruence within the secularisation theory debate.

Bruce (1996) is considered in detail since he is a leading British secularisation theorist developing the work of his predecessors and challenging those who undermine secularisation. Specifically, Bruce's version of secularisation theory posits a decline in the social significance of religion. Tracing the socio-cultural trajectory of Christianity, his attention focuses on the catalytic effects of the Reformation. His argument rests firmly upon the conviction that religion in modern Britain has neither the influence, breadth or scope which it had pre-Reformation. Indeed, the Reformation marks a watershed in which thereafter, the religious narrative has been one of decline. Crucially, religion has lost its social significance and concomitantly its relevance to the nation-state, social groups and individuals (1996:1). Whilst organised religion continues to be practised by a minority, and there are others involved with 'cultic' activities and varieties of New Age pursuits, still



others seek recourse to a more privatised and eclectic religiosity. However, the quantity and depth of involvement with the former is not significantly high, and privatised religiosity is declining in tandem with the decreasing popularity of more formal religious practises. The situation we are left with is a cultic milieu, hence the sub-title of Bruce's work: *From Cathedrals to Cults* (1996).

Bruce summarises the pre-Reformation religious worldview, contrasting this with the modern world. The aim is to demonstrate that modern Britain is no longer a religious world. Whilst the former should not to be construed as a 'golden age' of religion, and variegated religious ideas proliferated, the crucial point is that everybody believed in the central tenets of Christianity. Evidence substantiating this claim is strong.<sup>33</sup> For example, Christian rituals marked transitional rites such as baptisms and weddings, and the churching of women *post partum* was common (1996:3). Available evidence suggests strongly that the church was *the* dominant form of religion in contrast to the modern situation.

To substantiate the argument further, Bruce accentuates the interplay between Christianity and a burgeoning individualism during the Reformation. Religious reformers such as Calvin and Luther played a crucial role in this respect, since the reforms proclaimed a shift from the church *doing* religion for others to the idea of individual religious responsibility mediated through the way in which individuals conducted their lives. Prior to these reforms, there had been a more clearly demarcated religious division of labour.

The Reformation had various strands. The more prominent pertaining to secularisation were rationality, the rise of individualism, the foundations of modern science and the collapse of a unitary Christendom. This dislocated the power of the monolithic church, culminating in competing institutions and perspectives. People were subsequently required to become better informed about religion so that they could assume responsibility for their own spiritual state (1996: 21). One of the

fundamentals required for modernisation was improved communications. Printing in the vernacular, for example, greatly facilitated this, and likewise, “contributed to the rationalization of the world, the growth of modern science, and the fragmentation of once dominant religious cultures” (1996: 23). Unwittingly, the religion of the Reformation removed the body of authority (the monolithic church) previously connecting humanity and God, contributing to Christianity’s demise.

According to committed secularisation theorists such as Bruce, the supernatural realm has been increasingly eroded, a trend which stands in considerable distinction to pre-modern societies where there were few clear boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds. Bruce identifies several measures of the modern decline of religion, asserting that, “the direction of change in all indices of involvement in institutional religion is the same: downwards” (1996:34). To qualify this claim, falling church membership figures are underlined. In addition, clergy size has diminished, as have rituals performed in church, such as baptisms and weddings. The religious broadcasting audience has declined as has the sale of religious books.<sup>34</sup> Traditional Christian beliefs have become increasingly unpopular, an indisputable trend detailed in contemporary survey data.

For example, Gill’s (1998) most recent survey indicates three main findings: a decline in belief in God; and a decline in Christian beliefs. However, non-traditional beliefs remain fairly stable (1998:514).<sup>35</sup> The first of these is most relevant in this context, namely, the ambiguity of the concept God. Consideration of terms such as these beg the question of what exactly religious surveys are attempting to measure,

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<sup>33</sup> Historical evidence for this claim is based most convincingly upon the work of Obelkevitch, J. (1976), and Thomas, K. (1973).

<sup>34</sup> Churches periodically challenge the quality and quantity of religious broadcasting. For example, a recent article in *The Guardian* ‘Synod Rails at BBC’s Religious Output’ reports criticism from the Church of England for the BBC’s declining religious broadcasting and for changing the traditional hours devoted to such programmes. The church claims a 15% decrease in output over the past decade (Stephen Bates, 15.2.00); see also ‘Synod decides to monitor broadcasters’ Stephen Bates, *The Guardian*, 1.03.00. In this article, the National Secretary of the Secular Society is reported to have stated in response that ‘the [BBC] corporation should no longer see it as a prime duty to promote Christianity and the Church of England should not expect to have huge chunks of expensive peak air time allocated to its propaganda’.

<sup>35</sup> Non-traditional beliefs share proximity to the category ‘common religion’, explored in Chapter 6.

for example, what ideas of God are respondents more likely to disbelieve in? The nature of quantitative data occludes depth in exchange for breadth, and is unable to unpack the meaning of survey concepts interpreted by individual respondents, though an attempt in some surveys has been made to differentiate between an impersonal/personal God.<sup>36</sup> Gill's survey appears to support Bruce's argument since it seems indisputable that

without claiming that quantitative survey data can ever uncover the subtleties of Christian belief, it is nevertheless difficult to avoid the force of the data taken as a whole. In each of the areas surveyed there is evidence of an increase of disbelief in the second half of the twentieth century in Britain (Gill, 1998:514).

Crucially, there has been an increasing implausibility of Christian ideas across modern Britain. Some challenges to institutional beliefs have been channelled into the secularisation of some churches themselves, reducing their supernatural referents – questioning miracles, for example. Together with the trend toward ecumenicism this constitutes in part, both cause and effect of relativising Christianity. In response to de-churching, there have been some innovative ideas designed to appeal to youth in particular.

## **1.6 Modernising: Secularised Denominations**

Many churches, regardless of denomination have attempted to maintain themselves through accommodating to aspects of modern culture. It has been mentioned previously that some churches have incorporated the disco/club feel into their services in an effort to replicate the latest youth-styles. Indeed, some branches of Christianity have particularly strong links with rock music, *The Jesus Movement* for

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<sup>36</sup> The survey choice was between 'God as personal' and 'God as Spirit or Life force'. The results suggest that more people believe in the latter than the former in the 1990's. The real movement towards disbelief in a personal God increased over the period 1968 – 1987 (Gill, 1998:509).

example.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, the adoption of rave-style Christianity as a form of worship and ritual amongst some mainstream services represents a deliberate attempt to inject some modern charisma into the heart of Christian worship, incorporating and playing upon the cultural styles of youth. Genres like these have received severe criticism from some quarters. For example, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, commented on his opposition and dislike of, “clappy-and-happy, huggy-and-feely worship which seems to reduce God to a puppet” (*The Guardian*, 10.2.97).

Some studies on youth culture describe the rave scene more generally in a positive light, an embellished youth style of the eighties and nineties. Much has been made of the link between such genres and their association with drug mis-use, particularly Ecstasy, and even sexual abuse. These associations however, are not necessarily the essence of the rave. Rave magazines, inconspicuously circulated because of the emergent illegalities involved in staging raves, suggest the rave can be construed as a religious experience: intensive dancing to hypnotic beats, a feeling of unity with others, and the incorporation of traditional and pagan symbolism into its setting (Brown, (1994). This correlates with Willis’ contention that youth head for the realm and space of their own leisure in order to express themselves. Correspondingly, B. Martin (1981) draws attention to the liminoid character of youth, the importance of leisure, and particularly the role of music in their lives.

Brown describes raves as quasi-religious and an access to otherness, suggesting that they open the mind and dissolve boundaries:

You can walk into any dance shop in the country and easily see plenty more indications of the spiritual content to the rave phenomenon. Virtually every flyer has words like Vision . . . Revelations . . . Universe . . . Fusion . . . Reincarnation . . . Quest (Brown, 1994: 19).

Rietveld locates raves as a positive aspect of modern culture, as resources to challenge the existing symbolic order. The visual style itself is an expression of

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<sup>37</sup> See *Jesus Life: A UK Jesus Movement Magazine* 1997, Multiply Network and Jesus Fellowship/Modern Jesus Army.

resistance. It has been a, “statement of anti-consumerism, pro-vulgarity, anti-rationalism, anti-phallocentrism, the return of the ‘hippy’ and being young as an attitude” (in Redhead, 1993:55).

The rave has since been replaced with new styles of dance music utilising different fashion styles and symbols, though there is still some connection to earlier modes. As raves are incrementally replaced by other styles, the church may well find its own raves outmoded, and like other sectors of society will have to continue to make cultural accommodations to attract youth.

## 1.7 Unchurched Youth

Surveys, which present falling church membership levels and a general decline in Christian beliefs, convey the impression that lack of belief is a central factor in non-church attendance. Whilst this does not run counter to Davie’s ‘believing without belonging’ thesis (1990), it emphasises that belonging to a church may precede belief in its teachings. Gill suggests that whilst the general assumption is that we believe before we belong to a particular church, the inverse may be more accurate. In historical terms, “Christian *belonging* started to decline long before Christian belief” (1994: 31). That is, many people stopped going to church but continued to believe in an afterlife and the existence of God. Gill reiterates that a collapse in belonging has been *followed by* a decline in belief and not the other way round.

The idea of belonging to a church prior to believing is contentious. The term ‘belonging’ is ambiguous and not at all easy to define. For instance, we may concede that children could belong prior to believing because they are taken by their parents and may or may not form relationships there – but is it legitimate to conflate this with belonging? And how often would an individual have to attend church to feel that they belonged? Moreover, why would a person claim that they belong to a particular church if they do not wholly or partly believe in its teachings? One respondent in the

study explained that she does not belong to the Evangelical church because she does not know if she believes in the teachings. Churchgoing is almost entirely new to her and she lacks familial church connections. It seems more convincing to argue that believing and belonging constitute a corresponding process, and it may not be helpful to attempt to separate them. Regardless of definitional quandaries, it appears that belonging and belief are well correlated.

Gill appears to deplore church attempts at enticing adults to attend, complaining that

To rekindle belief amongst adults, who have had an experience of church or Sunday school somewhere in their background is one thing. But to initiate belief when there is nothing to rekindle may be quite another. Indeed, to initiate belief when there has been no prior belonging at all seems to be almost beyond credibility (Gill, 1994:41).

This is a rather cursory assumption, since many children continue to experience varying degrees of churching. For many children, their encounter with formal Christianity involves occasional attendance at church with Primary School at times of festivals, and/or invitations to celebrations such as fetes, christenings and weddings. But, Gill's observations need not be considered entirely negative to interested parties. Certainly, most children have little experience of church. However, referring to a more general religiosity and exploring the wide range of experiences and behaviour encapsulated in this concept, children have never been exposed to such a breadth of religious modes of thought and ways of life as those currently mediated by the British education system. The electronic media also wields impact. This breadth is not necessarily a cause of concern, unless we are saying that the only way to improve society and ourselves, our interactions with others, for example, is through the adoption of one set of religious beliefs, whether they be Christian, Muslim or what ever. The decline of the Christian narrative provides an opportunity for alternative religiosity, as well as secular alternatives, but the choices are compounded by the teaching of different frameworks. We cannot deny that in contemporary Britain, fewer children and young people attend church than at previous times, and that this trend is reflected across many parts of Western Europe. But, British schools continue



to impart varying degrees of church exposure to their pupils. Children and youth are not unchurched – they have less experience of church, but a wider array of religiosity. However, their encounter with the church is largely mediated by teachers and parents, and is therefore a passive rather than an active association.

## **1.8 Blaming the Parents**

The family is considered an important socialisation site and has a pervasive effect on the minds of its members (Cleaver, 1996), regardless of its form. Studies on religious commitment begin from this premise. Hoge *et al* (1982), for instance, examined patterns of parent-child transmission in relation to the church and concluded that value socialisation occurs in cultural subgroups more than in nuclear families. They found that contrary to parental values being of primary import during the teenage years, membership in one denomination or another was a greater predictor of children's values. Weak relationships were detected in parent-child value transmission and a stronger emphasis was placed upon "something in the larger social structure [which] strongly influences them" (1982:578). Conclusions from their study are vague, suggesting only that churches play some ambiguous role in the transmission of values. Another perspective is to locate the responsibility for church-going with parents. Indeed, the family remains the greatest predictor of religious practice, as this thesis and other research confirm.

More recent studies have explored factors leading to the cessation of church-going. Francis and Kay (1996) are particularly prominent and prolific writers in this field. Francis argues that many children are motivated to participate in church, but during the transition to Secondary Schooling, this interest diminishes significantly. Some of this disenchantment is fostered by negative attitudes to church amongst parents, especially where they are divorced. Finally, Francis implies the impact of an invisible hand:

The child's attitude toward religion [Christianity] becomes progressively less favourable from the age of eight to fifteen. Between these ages there are no

particular stages or crises associated with the child's movement away from religion. The deterioration which takes place in the child's attitude cannot be associated with any specific developmental or environmental changes, like the emergence of new levels of reasoning, the onset of adolescence . . . As they grow older, young people seem simply to become less and less enchanted with what they observe about religion. And this disenchantment is clearly rooted in the early years of the Primary School (Francis, 1984a: 8).

This explanation is vague and entirely indistinct about causes. People do not merely 'become' disenchanted. Secondly, a fundamental flaw in their analysis is the conflation of religion with Christianity - children and young people are disenchanted with Christianity - its churches, traditions and organisational structure. It is an exaggeration to deduce from this that many of these children are disenchanted with religion. Francis' argument is in danger of envisaging a mystical hidden hand that touches children to respond in a negative manner towards religion, a touch that becomes perceptible in Primary school.

Home is also revealed as crucial in a study on Catholicism and youth (Gaine, 1975). The central thrust of the report is that the church must modernise, though more recent writings on Catholicism allude to the apparently irresolvable contradiction between conforming to tradition and attempts to modernise. Numerous Catholics, like many other Christians, are creating areas of personal meaning as spheres of individual choice, and favour self-determination on matters of morality and belief. Again, the trend is most evident amongst younger age groups.<sup>38</sup> This strengthens an earlier assertion that levels of church attendance are not necessarily the only, or the most accurate barometer of religiosity.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Cardinal Winning has deplored the fact that Christianity is no longer *the* dominant culture, amidst prolific alternative lifestyles, criticising the influence of the media in particular as inundated with programmes that "peddle sexual perversion . . . [and] so-called alternative lifestyles", adding that "Catholic culture has, in someway, to vaccinate children against what we might refer to as the Neighbours or the Home and Away culture to which they are exposed". He also challenged the culture of rampant consumerism, remarking that, "As if the mere pursuit of material possessions could somehow make up for a spiritual void" (*The Scotsman*, 5.9.97.).

<sup>39</sup> Bellah conveys a similar sentiment:

To concentrate on the church in a discussion of the modern religious situation is already misleading for it is precisely the characteristic of the new situation that the great problem of



Family influence is undoubtedly a vital factor in considering why most young people are not church oriented. Francis urges strongly that the relationship between family support and church attendance is vital (1984a). The influence of family and peers during the teenage years is often erratic, but family influence may outweigh that of peers on particular issues, such as problem solving.

One measure of the tenacity of family relationships according to a study by the NSPCC (1995) concerns whom children trust with problems. This large, quantitative survey concluded that in the mid-teenage years both genders turn to friends with any problems, and occasionally their mothers. Prior to this age, mothers are the preferred confidants. Mothers continue to play a greater role in their child/rens care in contemporary society, spending more time with them than most partners do where they are present. This is an important point which will be returned to, since it was found that most beliefs held by the young people in this study were mediated through female relatives, usually the mother. However, learning societal beliefs and values is a process of reciprocity. Adults do not mechanically transmit these to children.<sup>40</sup> Becoming social always implies at least a two way process of negotiation.

Francis and Kay discovered a consistent and persistent decline in positive attitude amongst children and teenagers towards Christianity, most markedly between 1974 – 86, with 1994 revealing similar attitudes (1996). Their concern stems from a link they perceive between the drift from the churches and declining morality and self esteem amongst young people (1984b). The three main precursors of drift from the churches are the home, school and church. Their studies provide a basis for subsequent inquiries, raising questions that are of relevance to church and schools generally, on issues of morality, gender, home and school influence. However, factors they identify such as inadequate socialisation by parents merely locate the problem further back, in addition to denying agency to children. They place excessive emphasis upon poor parenting and negative attitudes to Christianity, without

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religion, the symbolisation of man [sic] in relation to the ultimate conditions of his existence, is no longer the monopoly of any group labelled religion (1970:42)

<sup>40</sup> Hoge *et al*, (1982:570); Pettit and Lollis,(1997).

considering where parents get these attitudes. This then, is one of the downsides to studies that rest upon a Likert scale; a tool designed to measure degrees of agreement and disagreement to particular statements.

## 1.9 Non-Institutional Religiosity

Levels of church-going are an inadequate measure of people's religiosity. What they do indicate, however, is the degree of impact of institutionalised religion on a societal level, or the social significance of institutional religion. In contrast to the nineteenth century and hitherto, modern societies locate religion amongst an extensive quantity of lifestyle choices and worldviews. It should be noted, however, that social class impinges greatly upon lifestyle choices. The modern situation is one of declining church membership, and some churches really are close to empty. This situation has recently culminated in threats of closure in the name of cost effectiveness.<sup>41</sup> In Scotland, for example, between 1959 and 1994 church attendance has fallen by half. In particular, churches are concerned with their growing lack of appeal to children and young people as they compete with other worldviews and lifestyles. This downward trend is chronic amongst the current generation of children and teenagers, and is likely to continue on a similar trajectory in the foreseeable future.<sup>42</sup> The crisis of confidence in the future of the church renders current ecclesiastical research particularly salient.

Thompson (1985) notes that although levels of formal religious practice are low, there are high levels of religious belief amongst the British, a view reiterated by Davie (1990).<sup>43</sup> Thompson's British sample revealed that 76% of respondents claim to believe in God, but substantially less chose to define themselves as religious (Thomson, 1988:402). Thompson's observation about low levels of practice are paralleled in large parts of western Europe, and correspondingly little is known about the significance of religious behaviour and beliefs in everyday life for large sections of British and European society. This suggests that we need to know about the nature of religious belief and it is at this point that survey techniques alone cannot explain and analyse the complexities of religious belief. It is also interesting that the decline

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<sup>41</sup> The United Reform Church for example, have 'downsized' to save costs on under used churches and in some instances share their church building with the Church of Scotland churches in a similar position (Unpublished paper, Campbell and Wiltshire, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> It has been projected that total Scottish child attendance (under 15) will show a decline of 17%, based on the 1994 figures (Brierley, 1995:77).

<sup>43</sup> K.Thompson, (1988); Davie, (1990).

in formal religious participation is not restricted entirely to white British people. The growth of a non-Christian presence in Britain, whilst significant, is not immense, hence reference to a limited pluralism.<sup>44</sup>

There are numerous surveys that attest to high levels of belief in God (deity, higher force or what ever), despite declining church membership levels (Davie, 1990; Brierley, 1995; Social Trends, 1997; Gill, 1998). The standard response rate affirming this appears to lie at around seventy-five per cent. Moreover, many people who do not attend church continue to associate themselves with some Christian denomination when questioned in surveys (Greeley, 1992, Social Trends, 1997). Additionally, limited surveys on invisible religion report a high level of diverse beliefs.<sup>45</sup> For example, one British Gallup Survey revealed that 41% of women and 31% of men claimed to have had a 'religious experience' (Hay, 1987:124). There are problems of interpretation here, and it could well be the case that belief in some sort of God and claims of denominational affiliation are little more than outmoded and nostalgic cultural hangovers from a past imbued with the supremacy of the religious worldview. The aforementioned data is of limited value in measuring the importance of religion to the unchurched. One way to access what these beliefs mean to the people who hold them is to probe and engage with them on their own terms; to take a phenomenological approach. This involves unpacking their beliefs, and establishing whether these influence their actions in any way, and/or interactions with others. Are their beliefs transmitted inter-generationally, as Bruce suggests they ought to be if they are significant? Are they *socially significant*, and what would a socially significant religiosity look like? If it is something that affects the beliefs, behaviour and interactions with others, then this may well constitute social significance. Whilst the church has lost the breadth and scope of power previously held, it has become relegated to the margins of social significance at best. However, whilst religion as an institution in modern Britain no longer retains its former significance, we should not automatically assume that what is left *lacks* social significance, unless we have firm evidence to substantiate this claim.

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<sup>44</sup> G. Parsons, (1993:18).

<sup>45</sup> Invisible religion is a term coined by Luckmann to account for non-institutional religion.

Stark and Iannoccone, for example, suggest there are obstinate facts that refute the idea of secularisation (1992:203). These include phenomena such as the rise of new religious movements, the spread of charismatic movements in America, the new Christian right and the rapid growth of conservative Protestant churches. Stark's religious economies model provides a framework for these obstinate facts. Drawing a parallel between religious economies and commercial economies, both consist of potential and current clients. Economies thrive in a *laissez-faire* environment in which deregulation leads to pluralism and competition. Competition leads to the specialisation of product and aggressive recruitment, then on to higher demand, then from higher demand to greater participation. Finke regards this as evidence of persistent religiosity in the suggesting that one innate consequence of the 'invisible hand', unfettered by state regulation, means that, "over time the diversity of the religious market will reflect the very diversity of the population itself" (Finke, 1996:22).

The problem here is that this has not occurred to anything near the extent they suggest, and their analyses apply to the American situation. Moreover, this model assumes a relatively static religious economy. If humans really do have needs that only religion can meet then we might expect the religious economy (if it exists) to undulate through cycles in response to shifting social parameters. In periods of higher demand the religious economy ought to boom. Measuring this boom where religiosity is privatised and not allied to religious groups (that is, churches) would prove extremely problematic.

The religious economy argument presents religion as responding to a universal need. The reason for its greater visibility in America is a result of greater marketisation of religion in response to demand. There are several points we can make about this claim. Contrary to their argument, the new religious movements that have been most successful are the world-affirming ones, those that do not pose any challenge to the existing social order (Bruce, 1996:189). This is in contrast to the type of religious movements that Stark suggests would be more successful, his contention being that the more innovative 'cults' would be strongest. On the whole, N. R. M.'s have not filled the gap left by churches to anything like the extent suggested by Stark and

Bainbridge and therefore cannot be assumed to have acted as a counter-balance to secularisation.

The functionalist position has already been referred to, though it is difficult to imagine a society without some form of religion, given that it is in the nature of humans to seek and append meaning both to what we confront (for example, nature) and create. Moreover, the religious economies model associated with these authors also make a similar assumption to Bruce: namely, that religion is something with physical collective boundaries, like a church. This approach likewise ignores or downplays privatised religiosity through an excessive focus upon 'cults' (their term) as the counter-balance to secularisation. We return to this debate in Chapter 8.

## **1.10 Conclusion**

Church statistics and opinion polls posit a society in which Christian church-going represents a minority pursuit and interest. Children and young people read this particular religion with its associated practices and norms as incongruous with contemporary modes of life. If long-term predictions are proved correct, then the church will be in a greater crisis than it is at present. Crucially though, church apathy cannot be construed as indicative of apathy toward more general religiosity, a claim throughout this thesis. Social scientific contributions to this field have suggested various reasons that encourage/discourage church attendance, overwhelmingly from the perspective of adults. From these, we can extract some of the more salient factors that may precipitate or inhibit church attendance amongst young people. It might be naïve, however, to surmise that young people either do or do not attend church for the same reasons as adults. For example, it may be that the social network aspect is more appealing than doctrine, or *vice versa*.

Religion is a social construct, regardless of any inherent truth claims associated with its forms. A reminder of its social construction is apparent in young people's perception of Christianity, a religion that many perceive as being out of joint with the current time period. We might therefore expect that any modern expressions of



religiosity would more likely fit the contemporary era of individualism and institutional malaise.

Christianity is now one of many global worldviews, compelled to compete with other life-style choices as self and identity seemingly float around in a meaningless web. Although most teenagers reject the church, they continue, as they must, in their attempt to make sense of the world and their position within it. What renders this task doubly problematic is the proliferation of worldviews and lifestyles with an emphasis upon individualism and hedonism. For some young people their own brand of religiosity may act as a haven from the tensions and contradictions of modern life. Alternatively, some writers such as Martin and Pluck, and later Willis (1990), have suggested that in the pursuit of pleasure, power and meaning, youth heads to the realm of leisure: to informal spaces which facilitate the expression of their own contexts and meanings.

Martin and Pluck (1977) found that teenage beliefs were inconsistent and not amenable to systematisation.<sup>46</sup> The study provides a snapshot into young people's beliefs in Britain in the late seventies. The findings remain relevant in view of periodic concern over the decline in church-going and the inferred correlation with moral laxity amongst younger age groups.<sup>47</sup> They contend that young people have been, and continue to be, wide open to belief but not in the manner traditionally conceived of by the church. Amongst their respondents, few were committed church-goers and there seemed to be no apparent evidence of an active spiritual quest. Their findings are contradicted by later studies such as *Children in the Way*

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<sup>46</sup> Their findings were similarly replicated in the Finnish study by Helve (1991). She claimed that worldviews could be loosely classified as religious, metaphysical/magical or scientific. Teenage respondents tended to oscillate between all three, and she concluded, like Francis, that favourable religious attitudes (by which she meant Christianity) decreased with age, though interest in 'orientalism' increased.

<sup>47</sup> The media reports on this regularly. *The Sunday Telegraph* 'Murderous Innocence' B. Morrison, 1.2.97. In Hooligan (1983) Pearson claims that the middle aged of every generation look back nostalgically on the early years of their lives as golden ages of morality, contrasting it with the moral degeneracy of the younger generation. In a similar vein, Redhead write of youth that, "as the end of the century approaches a 'hedonism in hard times' is perhaps the best way to describe a sea of youth styles circulating and re-circulating in a harsh economic and political climate where youth is increasingly seen . . . as a source of fear for employed, respectable society and a 'law and order' problem for the police. New youth cultures such as ravers and crusties . . . have revived the debate about 'folk devils' and moral panics" (1993:4).

(1988), which maintains that “while young people generally are not convinced about the place and importance of the church, they are searching for a faith and a spirituality” (1988:15). This thesis provides details to support this claim.



## Chapter 2 Constructing Youth

### 2.1 Youth

“[T]hrough our representations of the worlds of children and youth, researchers are part of the process of creating, and to some degree, containing them” (Caputo, 1997:39).

Most social scientific literature concerning young people classifies them in fixed terms. Generally, they are considered as a homogenous category characterised by adolescent angst. Research tends to downplay the fact that these terms are actually social and cultural constructs varying according to context and social structural parameters (James and Prout, 1990). However, this age-range exhibits heterogeneity in terms of such factors as socio-economic background, lifestyles and tastes. Distinctiveness is similarly evidenced through variables such as gender and ethnicity. Significant similarities include dependence upon parents or carers for financial and emotional support, regardless as to whether or not these are adequately provided (Morrow, 1994:128).

As a group, they are also considered non-productive, despite the fact that many engage in paid employment or domestic work, such as caring for dependents.<sup>48</sup> They are legally obliged to participate in full-time education; hence their membership is required to varying degrees in the micro-cosmic structure of the school community where they are expected to observe its norms and rules. Failure to display conformity may result in sanctions, punishments also applicable in both the implicit and explicit rules of wider society. During the prolonged childhood years, dependence is a central feature of their lives during which time they lack the citizenship rights conferred upon adults. It is important to bear this in mind with research involving teenagers. The main points to remember are that despite differences, they do share similar life circumstances. Secondly, the way their behaviour is analysed is inextricably linked to contemporary versions of both

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<sup>48</sup> Morrow (1994) presents contemporary data from the UK, which illustrates that childhood continues to be constructed overwhelmingly as a period of dependency, rendering children's participation in paid labour invisible.

childhood and adulthood. Finally, because they are dependent on adults in both familial and institutional terms, their ability to express agency is curtailed. This impacts upon the variety of ways in which they interpret the world and the way others interpret them.

The study of childhood and youth is generally located within social sciences such as psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Historically, these have been largely influenced by developmental theories. In sociology, however, there is increasing evidence of a shift from viewing children as passive recipients of culture, towards the emergence of a reconstructed view of children as active participants. In fact, until quite recently “the history of the study of childhood in the social sciences has been marked not by an absence of interest in children . . . but by their silence” (James and Prout, 1997:7). This thesis represents part of the recent trend towards allocating space for the voices of youth. The following section considers changing constructions of childhood in more detail.

## **2.2 The Orthodox Model of Childhood**

In the nineteenth century, forays into the ‘condition’ of childhood were primarily to allow carers to steer progeny through a clear developmental route towards independence. Since psychology dominated early efforts, the idea of biological development and natural growth were favoured (James and Prout, 1997:10). The critical failure of psychological theories, however, was that in positing a universalistic and irrational view of the child as natural (as has also been the case with women),<sup>49</sup> the social dimensions involved in the construction of childhood were overlooked. Conversely, this type of approach presents ‘adults’ as the embodiment of rationality – and as competent social individuals.

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<sup>49</sup> See Lacquer (1987) ‘Orgasm Generation and the Politics of Reproductive Biology’ pp.1-41 for an interesting outline of shifting historical conceptions of women and its relationship to the development of political rights for women.

From the 1950's, sociological accounts offered a contrasting perspective – socialisation. This was, and still does, present socialisation as a process that imbues children with the ability to participate in society through the acquisition of social roles. Parsons may be considered representative here (1951). Again however, the 'child' suffers from similar deficits suggested above. From this perspective, the argument infers that it is only through socialisation that full rationality, maturity and culture are able to be conferred (Mackay, 1973).

Piaget drew upon the core of the assumptions above, outlining stages of development as evolutionary universals, presenting the child as moving through cognitive stages of development (1932). Kohlberg modified these stages to account for moral reasoning amongst children and young people as progressing through stages (1981). However, both ignore social factors in the development of children, in particular the fact that people develop at different rates in different social and cultural contexts. In addition, and perhaps more damningly, both Piaget and Kohlberg have relied excessively upon *male* subjects as universal models for their theories. This bias is returned to later.

In sociology, transformations in the conceptualisation of childhood had begun to emerge more cogently with the work of Aries (1962). By examining medieval art he claimed that children had rarely been depicted, and where they were, this tended to be in the form of 'miniature adults'. He elaborates further that there was not a socially distinguished period of childhood, since children were abruptly integrated into adult activities. Childhood then, is a fairly recent and modern phenomenon.

The position of Aries can be objected to, partly on the grounds that art as representative of past social trends is contestable in itself, particularly when we consider that a wealthy elite commissioned such works, hence representations are particularistic impressions of 'real life'. Pollock (1983) takes issue on another level. Namely, the perception of children may well have been different in the past, but this does not imply that children were not perceived as children and experienced some sort of childhood.

Hardman (1973) confers substantial agency to children and young people. She does not theorise childhood as pre-rational, but as a series of life-worlds peopled by competent social actors. This situates them as 'being' instead of always becoming, enabling sociologists to explore their social and cultural present (in Brannen and O'Brian, 1996:45). To understand the life-worlds of children and young people, an awareness of their position more as social actors, and less as passive consumers of an ambiguous socialisation process is advised.

In modern Britain, the category 'childhood' is broad and inclusive, often including those in their late teens (Alderson, 1994:15). James accentuates the distinctiveness of the teenage years from childhood, envisaging these as comprising young people who have "relinquished their membership of the category 'child' " (1997:43), though the timing of this transition is less clear. Caputo (1997) supports this distinction but cautions that if children and youth are treated separately they may be relegated to the margins of research as patterns of the past reveal. Researchers also need to be aware that the distinctions between the groups are arbitrary and blurred, and that it is important to focus on the whole without losing sight of the particular (1997:39).

This thesis has focused upon 15 – 17 year olds, acknowledging that they are social actors involved in the construction of their own life-worlds rather than forged through the hidden hand of socialisation, electing the term 'young people' as a descriptive category to distinguish them from younger children inhabiting life-worlds and social spaces constructed mostly on different grounds. The majority of participants were content with the description teenager, though this can also convey derogatory signs, evoking images of troublesome adolescence explored in the following section.

## 2.3 Adolescence

Adolescence has very recent origins. Writing within the field of youth studies, Musgrove explains this social construction as “invented at the same time as the steam engine” (Musgrove, 1964:33). Along a similar vein, Hudson notes that

the extension of schooling beyond the age of puberty [which] meant the ‘creation’ of a period of life when young people, demonstrably no longer children, were nevertheless not yet adults and therefore could be subject to the discipline of their teachers and their parents on whom they must remain financially dependent (1984:34).

The period towards the end of the nineteenth century spawned post-elementary education and placed working class children in a peculiar situation. Increasingly they were portrayed as problematic youth and contemporary discourse centred upon social control. This was the main period of the emergence of the social category of adolescence (Gillis, 1974). There is considerable consensus surrounding the newness of this term, incorporating the idea that this socially constructed mass of child and youth labour were potentially deviant and problematic, particularly as the process of industrialisation ensued.<sup>50</sup>

Aries (1962) provides an interesting contrast at this juncture. His portrayal of ‘upper class boys’ illustrates periods of reckless youth much earlier than that suggested above. Moreover, their behaviour was not considered in such negative terms. Drawing on examples from both France and England, he recounts tales of troublesome boys. They were searched for weapons prior to school, took part in fatal attacks upon teachers, and engaged in riots and rebellion during a traditionally elongated period of dependent independence historically characteristic of young males from affluent backgrounds. They were not perceived of as disorderly adolescents in contemporary terms, nor were they conceived of in the same manner as their working class counterparts who were denied the same freedoms and

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<sup>50</sup> Cote and Allahar (1994) support the view that adolescent turmoil is contemporaneous with industrialisation. Others argue that such turmoil is part of the human condition, and that the real difference lies in the way that it is handled. For example, through rituals and rites of passage which

opportunities. Their behaviour though paradoxically unacceptable was acceptably associated with the privileges of their class. Again however, Aries is subject to criticism for overplaying the modern invention of childhood, and also since the historical evidence he cites to substantiate his claims is often erratic and rests upon a very small sample. His research though, has provoked prolific debate amongst the social scientific audience, illustrating shifting perceptions of the interplay between biological and social constructions of youth.<sup>51</sup>

The language in which adolescence is framed intimates a syndrome affecting older children, stemming from physiological changes evoking an indiscriminate and often destructive influence upon the emotional state of the sufferer.<sup>52</sup> The behaviour of the sufferer occasionally shifts the boundaries of acceptability and is often excused as resulting from the condition of adolescence, with distinctions according to class and gender.<sup>53</sup> Adolescence then, is demarcated as disorder versus the order of adulthood, as religion is deemed irrational alongside the ostensible rationality of scientific knowledge systems.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, notions of childhood generally, present the child as the embodiment of difference, whereby “as a consequence of the adult member being considered naturally as mature, rational and competent, the child is viewed in juxtaposition as less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete” (Jenks, 1982:19). Young people are caught at an amorphous juncture signifying difference and disorder, a “moment of (potentially dangerous) change and transition epitomised by ‘youth’ [which] is important precisely because it operates in contrast to prevailing

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confer a symbolic and instrumental significance upon young people as their status shifts to adulthood (see Van Gennep, 1960; Bernardi, 1986; Giddens, 1989; Helve, 1993; Griffin, 1997).

<sup>51</sup> See E.P. Thompson (1963), for example. He has provided sober depictions of working class childhood and youth labour during the early phases of industrialisation.

<sup>52</sup> See Hudson (1984), and F. Paterson (1999) ‘Social Problems and Educational Knowledge’.

<sup>53</sup> For example, working class boys are less likely to get away with behaviour construed as disruptive than boys from middle class homes. Similarly, girls are less likely to get into trouble than boys, though when they do, social revulsion is likely to be accentuated. See Giddens (1989:140); Griffin (1997; E. Sheffield), and ‘Tough Girls’, *The Guardian*, 7.3.97.

<sup>54</sup> Gellner (1974), for example, does not claim that non-scientific knowledge is declining, rather that only progress through science is capable of making real material differences to the world. Indeed, it is scientific knowledge that has facilitated humanity’s self-indulgence taking it to unprecedented levels allowing people to be consumed with meaning and being. Religion by contrast is ultimately superficial.



notions of innocent dependent childhood and static mature adult status” (Griffin, 1997:7).<sup>55</sup>

In modern societies, the period of youthfulness has been stretched and explicitly countenanced and exploited through media imagery.<sup>56</sup> Protracted transitions to work have occurred markedly since the 1960’s and have raised the threshold of adulthood, lengthening the period of youth. Whatsmore

the various phases of life in which age was linked to status have become ‘uncoupled’ . . .[and] despite the vocational emphasis in schools and colleges, education no longer necessarily relates to work . . . The state plays a large part in defining age statuses” (Ainley, 1997:6).

Research highlights tensions precipitated by a lack of modern transition rites for young people and the paucity of clear roles and boundaries. Whereas previously, delegates from society such as the shaman or priest functioned to inaugurate and signify new phases of life, they have not been succeeded in the shift towards societilisation. Unclear transitional boundaries can result in a crisis of meaning and provoke profound thoughts about the human condition.

‘Adolescent turmoil’ appears to have been a feature of many different cultures, but transitional rituals and rites of passage may have acted as a safety valve against disorder (van Gennep, 1960; Bernardi, 1986). Helve suggests that “in non-literate cultures initiation rites have both a symbolic and an instrumental significance in the process by which young people become adults” (Helve, 1993:90).

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<sup>55</sup> Historical sources suggest that there has always been tension between young people and their elders (Baumeister and Tice, 1986). Even Hesiod in the eighth century BCE warned of recklessness of youth and their threat to social order (Cote and Allahar, 1994: xii). More recently, an NSPCC survey (1995) asked parents whether they thought their children were less well behaved compared with when they were children. Nearly three quarters felt that children were less well behaved, a result which strengthens the view that adults/older people routinely lament a deteriorating trend in younger people’s behaviour.

<sup>56</sup> See Zylberberg and Remy (1991) who disapprove of the lack of transitional rites. Langman (1992) suggests that coming of age occurs in shopping malls, which are microspheres of empowerment from which consumption gratifies desires, sustaining images of self and providing meaning and pleasure. Similarly, B. Martin describes leisure sites as significant meccas of liminality for youth (1981:139).

Cote and Allahar (1994) argue the contrary, however, insisting, like Musgrove above, that adolescent turmoil is indeed contemporaneous with industrialisation, and therefore, it “cannot be an inevitable part of human development . . . [Moreover] a smooth transition to adulthood depends on whether or not adults provide a supportive and welcoming environment” (Cote and Allahar, 1994:xiii). In response, it might be suggested that it is the *intensity* of turmoil associated with modern youth, conferring a period of twilight status that is specific to the social and structural relations and conditions in which it occurs. There are no longer any clear roles or boundaries in the protracted transition towards adulthood and the rights of citizenship this confers.

There is strong evidence that the demise of clear roles for youth is a relatively recent occurrence. For instance

A young person aged, say 14, looking forward in the 1960's could, with a reasonable probability of being right, have predicted within a very few years the timing of his or her future life course – leaving school, entering employment, leaving home, marrying and setting up home, early patterns of child-bearing and rearing. None of this is now possible in conditions that have returned for most of us to pre-war and Victorian insecurities (Ainley, 1997:6).

Indeed, the major concern amongst respondents in this thesis relates to insecurities of employment and relationships, confirming the above sentiment. These spheres are central concerns in their current lives, spending considerable time working out the most effective ways to optimise success in these areas.

Mead (1972) has long argued that ambiguous roles together with inconsistent beliefs can lead to undesirable outcomes. Further, that there are too many decisions to be made in modern societies imbued with competing beliefs:

From one point of view the situation in which we now find ourselves can be described as a crisis of faith, in which men, having lost their faith not only in religion, but also in political ideology and in science, feel they have been deprived of every kind of security. I believe this crisis of faith can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that there are now no elders who know



more than the young themselves about what the young are experiencing . . . [T]oday the elders can no longer present with certainty moral imperatives to the young. Today the central problem is commitment: to what past, present, or future can the idealistic young commit themselves? (Mead, 1972:80).

Protracted transitions to employment through incremental benefit reductions and work initiatives may have

Raised the threshold of adulthood and lengthened what is regarded as 'youth', 'adolescence', or even the 'permanent adolescence', or 'post-adolescence', in which many young men particularly [and women] are allegedly trapped . . . [T]he various phases of life in which age was linked to status have become 'uncoupled'. . . [and] despite the vocational emphasis in schools and colleges, education no longer relates necessarily to work, nor marriage to childbearing (Ainley, 1997:4-5).

It may be that young people 'come of age' in modern sites such as shopping malls which stand as "symbols and monuments to an entire amusement order in which carnivals and spectacles of consumption gratify desires and sustain images of self" (Langman, 1992:55). One corollary of this is that since peer group experiences are crucial in the consolidation of an identity, a form of horizontal initiation occurs amongst the young, and largely in isolation from former hierarchies of vertical initiation. That is, instead of adults or elders creating opportunities and clear guidelines for rites and initiation to adulthood, young people are doing it themselves at the expense of severe criticism. The consumption of alcohol, for example, as well as a wide range of experimental, hedonistic risk taking behaviours: negotiating drugs and sexuality, for example. Society absolves itself of any responsibility and blames the individual, conjuring moral panics that inhibit youth leisure lifestyles.

A recent study identifying the fundamental needs of teenagers in Britain today (HMSO, 1986) points to the many ways in which teenagers reject the belief systems they were raised with as they experiment with a wide range of different identities. The study is entirely relevant since it illustrates that teenagers are not only rejecting church values and beliefs, rather, anything that they consider prescriptive, authoritative and restrictive. That is, elements of their earlier worldviews are rejected and contested to varying degrees as the self struggles to consolidate into

something independent and meaningful from parents and school. Solace is often sought in peer groups undergoing corresponding experiences. Many forge their own cultural spaces to this effect.

## **2.4 Youth Cultures**

Willis (1990) remains a prolific researcher in the field of youth cultures. One of his studies (based in the north of England) established evidence of a form of common culture amongst school-leaving youth. Whilst the aim was to examine in detail the cultural life of young people in one area of Britain, several aspects have applicability to young people generally and their creativity capacity for constructing meaning systems. Justifying ethnographic and qualitative techniques, Willis reiterates the importance of research with young people:

[t]he teenage and early adult years are important from a cultural perspective and in special need of a close 'qualitative' attention because it is here, at least in first-world western cultures, where people are formed most self-consciously through their own symbolic and other activities. It is where they form symbolic moulds through which they understand themselves and their possibilities for the rest of their lives. It is also the stage where people begin to construct themselves through nuance and complexity, through difference and similarity (1990:7).

This emphasises the importance of studying young people, since identity and meaning-making are amongst their most central concerns. The fundamental stress of Willis' study is that young people engage in a vibrant, often unseen, symbolic life and symbolic creativity. They are constantly attempting to express something about their actual or potential cultural significance, even though others often condemn this. It is this actual or potential significance which constitutes the realm of living culture in which their lives are "full of expressions, signs and symbols through which individuals and groups seek creatively to establish their presence, identity and meaning" (1990:1).

Crucially, Willis' research focused upon the many ways in which young people invest their life spaces and social practices with meanings. Willis proposes that in 'late modernity' there has been a widespread crisis of cultural values and that symbolic creativity is vital to the creation and sustenance of identity on three levels: the individual, the group, and even to cultural identity itself.

Symbolic creativity is an integral part of what Willis defines as 'necessary work'. This is part of everyday human activity and fundamental to ensuring the production and reproduction of human existence. Humans are intrinsically creative, and much of this inspiration has been destroyed by the content and structure of work in the contemporary era. A further type of necessary work is symbolic work, the application of human capacities upon symbolic resources and raw materials to produce meanings. This is considered necessary since humans produce and communicate. Creativity, in the sense of remaking the world for our selves as we seek and construct our own identity, is a component of human being-ness.

Symbolic work and symbolic creativity produce and reproduce individual identities and locate these in larger wholes. They are associated with, and help to form overall styles of thinking through which to make sense of the world. Processes of symbolic work and symbolic creativity are highly unstable and contested under modern conditions, since young people experience one aspect or another of the 'social condition' of youth. For instance, imposed institutions and ideological constructions of youth favouring particular readings and definitions of what young people should be like. These processes related to modernisation have eroded

a sense of a 'whole culture' with allocated places and a shared, universal value system. Organised religion, the monarchy, trade unions, schools, public broadcasting, high culture and its intertwining with public culture no longer supply ready values and models of duty and meaning to help structure the passage into settled adulthood (Willis, 1990:13).

As traditional value systems are eroded, through symbolic work and creativity it is possible for some young people to forge new resistant, resilient and independent

identities as survivalist strategies and alternatives to the impoverished roles urged by an apparent rationalisation and bureaucratic system.

As creativity in necessary symbolic work decreases under modern conditions, Willis purports that leisure increases as the operative site of symbolic work in identity making. It is here that young people “turn deliberately to the informal and resist administered symbols” (1990:6). Similarly, Hendry enunciates in subsequent research that:

While ‘hanging around doing nothing in particular’ tends to be perceived by many adults either as a waste of time or a threat to social order, studies have demonstrated that for many young people it is a meaningful activity which provides an opportunity to explore relationships with peers, free from adult supervision and control (Hendry, 1993:6).

Powerlessness and socio-economic marginality release their tight hold in the informal realm, a situation that can be applied variously to young people in the school context. Here, they resist and contest what is laid down for them in and seek meaningfulness through leisure time, negotiating and renegotiating their identities in different forms of style which often conflict and antagonise parental and school expectations.<sup>57</sup> The meanings they construct are not always visible to outsiders, a position noted earlier about the difficulties in studying non-church religiosity. Forms of resistance and reinterpretations of Christianity are also evidenced amongst church-goers as Chapter 7 illustrates.

The final point in Willis’ study is that there is a common culture shared by youth, though this is diverse and eclectic in nature. The cultural media is all-pervasive with musical interests occupying centre stage. Institutional politics bore them and are associated with coercion, exclusion, and are irrelevant to what really energises them. This corresponds to perceptions of institutional religion discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, where respondents resist and re-shape institutionally mediated Christianity. These

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<sup>57</sup> Hudson (1984) maintains that teachers and social workers judge girls more harshly where their behaviour does not meet expected cultural gendered norms. Central to her argument is the tension between mainstream discourses of femininity and adolescence. These are subversive of one another and girls are left uncertain about what adults really want from them.

chapters also show young people constructing their own eclectic meanings at a more profound level, turning their back on the institutional malaise of 'high culture/high religion'.

Common culture then, is a generic term indicating many cultural forms, though it is not, as post-modern culture is held to be, chaotic and meaningless.<sup>58</sup> Pessimistic post-modernism may be a neurosis which, according to Willis "is nothing more than a bad case of idealist theorists becoming the victims of their own nightmares. They mistake their own metaphors for reality and announce that modern culture is all surface in danger of collapse" (1990: 27).

The symbolic creativity and necessary work described by Willis also allows expressions of modern religiosity, particularly since there has been as Willis avers, an erosion of a sense of 'whole religion'. Religiosity may offer an alternative to the impoverished roles urged by an apparent rationalisation and bureaucratisation. The young people participating in this research resist administered symbols such as those associated with Christianity. Occasionally, the meaning of these symbols may be reversed and/or used in innovative ways.

Martin (1981), like Willis, highlights the importance of leisure for youth, depicting leisure sites as 'meccas of liminality'. She explains that youth are often depicted as rebellious or as nonconformists because of the liminoid character of this transitional 'adulthood'. In some sense, this type of behaviour is expected, though less so from girls who seem to be doubly dis-privileged in youth as they fall incrementally into conforming to others' expectations.

Hudson (1984) has addressed the issue of gender, focusing explicitly upon teenage girls. She asserts that girls are confronted by conflicting sets of expectations at school which arise from connotations appended to the juxtaposition of femininity and adolescence. Dominant themes emerging from her research centre upon teachers'

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<sup>58</sup> See Holmwood (1996) for a detailed deconstruction and criticism of postmodernism (esp. pp. 107-109 and 129-130). Also, Callinicos (1999) critiques postmodernism (esp. 258-282) defined in Lyotard's words as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (1999:2).

judgements of girls' behaviour in terms of one or the other themes above. For example, "judgements of behaviour in terms of adolescence [normal adolescence] allow for more tolerance than judgements in terms of femininity" (1984: 32). The study adduced both the framing and content of adolescence as a masculine construct, embodied in the restless male youth, as Martin likewise observes: "in all classes the adolescent is expected to rebel a little, especially the boy, and to be a bit wild and irresponsible before settling down" (B. Martin, 1981:139).

Hudson accentuates the glaring contradiction between the discourse of femininity and adolescence. Adolescence is perceived as a social role associated with particular problems and remedies, a phase that will pass as maturity is assumed. However, many girls resist adolescence in an attempt to escape labels such as 'childish', aspiring instead to the status conferred by mainstream femininity. This actually encourages the reproduction of the female social role through the continuance of traditional female domestic roles. Moreover, it is teachers, a female dominated profession, who are implicated in the perpetuation of this order. Teachers impose boundaries upon accepted modes of femininity in school dress codes, for example. They encourage and reward stereotypical feminine personality characteristics, like conformism, whilst simultaneously demanding the development of 'masculine' characteristics of independence and political and career interests. Teenage girls are in a peculiar position: instructed on the one hand not to be childish (adolescent), in response seeking refuge in a femininity that encourages and eternalises gendered stereotypes.

Hudson's insights shed some light on why females are more likely to be church-goers. Christianity favours particular attitudes, some of the more conducive being commitment and conformity to its traditions and beliefs, as well as adherence to particular gendered roles framed by such qualities as empathy and responsibility. These are not qualities associated with the typical spontaneity and hedonism of adolescence. If as Hudson suggests, professionals involved with 'adolescents' judge girls according to the discourse of either femininity or adolescence, then perhaps the



socially constructed feminine qualities rewarded in girls' behaviour constitutes part of the attraction to Christian ideology and associated practices.

Since socially sanctioned femininity continues to reflect submissive qualities, the reasons why more females are attracted to religiosity are less opaque. One major corollary of submissiveness is powerlessness. Religiosity, institutional or otherwise, can be interpreted as one of several means of attempting to exercise personal power. This might be through putting faith in a God or engaging in ritualistic behaviour such as avoiding walking under a ladder. Powerlessness is also a feature of contemporary youth of both genders, and perhaps provides some explanation for the attraction of religiosity.

Childhood parameters fluctuate through time, context and culture. During the twentieth century the period of dependence has extended whilst paradoxically the demarcation between adult and child has become more blurred. As youth are generally required less in the field of employment (the exception being low paid, low skilled work in the service sector), they have few rights of citizenship and are forced to remain in school longer, extending the period of child-like dependency. Targeted as consumers of leisure industries such as media and music, identity is increasingly illusory, fleeting and non-authentic, with chaos and confusion infecting the epidermis of society. It may be that

there is an epidemic of socially produced identity crises in advanced industrial societies . . . [Indeed] contrary to the widely held belief that youth is the best time of one's life, young people now constitute one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of the entire population (Cote and Allahar, 1994:xvii; and 3).

In terms of the influence of the mass media, the authors above suggest an exploration and concern with the way in which this material indoctrinates the young into an ethos of consumerism, conformity and immediate gratification. They advocate encouraging people to develop a more critical consciousness, rather than embracing the 'good life' and consumer led fleeting identities (Skinner, 1988; Langman, 1992).



The impact of the media is returned to subsequently in Chapter 6 where the propensity towards belief in the paranormal is explored.

The respondents in this study do not object to being described as teenagers and did not describe themselves as adolescents when asked which term they prefer. For this reason they are referred to in their chosen terms, and also as young people since this conveys some respect to their social position. Despite the literature on youth suggesting strongly that current times are particularly bad, the majority of respondents do not indicate this. Most believe they have the power to shape their own lives and that they can attend university or further education if they work hard enough. Success in these spheres, that is the worldly domain, are considered both crucial and attainable.

The following chapter presents details about the respondents involved in this study, and justifies the methodology.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.1

The thesis focuses upon five groups of young people studying for their 'Highers' (15 – 17 year olds). This is not a homogenous group, but most people by this age will have experienced a range of life crises and negotiated meanings accordingly. The death of a relative, or relationship breakdown with family and friends, for example, force these youngsters to reflect on their lives.

The preceding chapter has suggested that the mid to latter teenage years constitute a transitional period between dependent 'childhood' and (apparently) independent young adulthood. The latter phase refers more explicitly to the ability to activate one's own coping mechanisms without excessive recourse to family/carers for economic, social and psychological support. In other words, to be a fully functioning and rational citizen. Likewise, the mid to late teenage years are a period in which many renounce the church and various clubs if they have not done so earlier.<sup>64</sup> In Scotland, only 6% to 7% of the adult population attend the nation's main church regularly, the figure for under fifteen's being even lower when younger children are excluded (Brierley, 1995:33). In modernity, clear transition rites to adult status are lacking, rendering such factors as identity formation problematic: older certainties and frameworks, such as the Christian worldview, and even fixed gender boundaries have been displaced by increasing uncertainties.

The literature that surveys young people has a tendency to focus upon particular areas, specifically educational institutions, the familial sphere, and more recently an abundance

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<sup>64</sup> Hendry *et al* (1993) claim that the number of young people attending all clubs is declining, and that membership (where it applies), is casual rather than committed. Generally, more girls attend than boys. This pattern is reflected across all church activities, becoming more pronounced across older age-groups.

of market research focusing on consumption patterns.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, this research locates young people within a taken-for-granted category of 'childhood', which depicts children and young people as passive receptors of adult culture (Caputo, 1995:22). Research on religion tends similarly towards concentration in one particular area: Christianity. This research aims to go some way towards addressing this imbalance through an appreciation of young people as active social agents, and by exploring religiosity in terms that exceed and build upon the excessive focus upon Christianity as representative of mainstream religiosity.

Amongst the five groups selected, two consisted of practising Christians to facilitate a comparison of their ideas and experiences of 'religion' with non-Christians. However, in the latter three groups there were also some nominal Christians and more committed Christians. This had not been anticipated prior to their selection. A distinction between the nominal and committed Christian has been described by Brierley, as the difference between those who attend church sometimes – irregularly – against those who attend at least once a week – regularly (1995: 23). These definitions are however, subject to ambiguity and open to contestation, particularly amongst different denominations.

Further rationale for studying any contrast between young Christians and their non-Christian counterparts is captured below. Levitt (1996) has developed the work of Francis and Kay (1996) in an attempt to develop an understanding of the interplay between childhood and Christianity. Studying the impact of church schools upon attitudes to Christianity in a small town in England, she identifies, though fails to exploit, the important issue of what it actually means to be a church-attender. Crucially, it cannot be assumed that all church-goers attend for the same reasons:

If there is a need to look more deeply than the statistics for attendance and belief then as well as asking if those who *do not* attend may nevertheless be religious,

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<sup>65</sup> For examples, see Willis (1977, 1990); McRobbie (1980); Solberg (1990, 1994); James and Prout (1990), and MINTEL (1995).

there is also the question of whether those who *do* attend do so for religious reasons (Levitt, 1996:12)

In other words, it is entirely reasonable to ask to what extent regular church-goers are really religious. This is an important point and is considered within the context of this thesis.

A further reason for selecting 'groups' was to enable focus groups to be conducted comprising young people familiar with one another (to promote synergy). The adoption of this approach was intended to diminish feelings of unease associated with the unequal power relationship between interviewer and respondent. Additionally, ethical dilemmas involved in interviewing school 'children' made groups a favourable method to access young people, that is, approaching them through existing organisational structures.

One church group was selected from a mainstream Church of Scotland (MC) and the other from an Evangelical Church (EC). These two were chosen to contrast with one another since the literature suggests strongly that the latter are having more success in increasing and sustaining membership levels, particularly amongst young people (discussed in the previous chapter). Most of this evidence comes from America,<sup>66</sup> though there are indications that Evangelical churches in Britain are attracting youth with more success than their mainstream counterparts. Moreover, Byrne's observation is instructive here: "the actual forms of religion to which we give the label 'Christianity' have shown, and continue to show, the most astonishing variety" (1988:11), hence this study intends to establish the extent of any revealed variations.

Two of the remaining three groups comprise school pupils from the same school in the city. Indeed, the first non-denominational Secondary school to be built in Edinburgh.

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<sup>66</sup> American church-going rates vastly exceed those of Britain and other European countries. Moreover, institutional religious participation is more visible and easier to quantify. Bruce (1996) has noted that Christianity is also more prominent in the American public sphere, for example, the 'new Christian right' with its socio-moral campaigns (1996:129). America's origins as a migrant society may also be a factor in the proliferation and visibility of particular forms of religion (*ibid.*, 143).

The school is located within an area of considerable social and economic deprivation, its pupil intake comprises children from non-professional parental backgrounds. One group comprised pupils studying *Higher* Religious and Moral Education (R.M.E.: the **RS** group), whilst the other group comprised pupils studying two or more science subjects at Higher level (physics, biology, chemistry: the **SS** group – Science Studies). Studying for *Highers* is increasingly common amongst pupils from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, as is staying on in education generally, particularly with changes in the benefit system and shifting work patterns.<sup>67</sup> It ought not be taken for granted therefore, that all pupils who study for *Highers* derive from an amorphous ‘middle class’, despite changing aspirations.<sup>68</sup> It was hoped that these groups might show some differences in their attitudes to religion, based on the proposition that science and reason (two apparent correlates), have displaced religious beliefs.<sup>69</sup>

The final group incorporated young people in the Woodcraft Folk (**WF**). This is an organisation for children and young people, established as a reaction against what their founders considered authoritarian church-type groups with an emphasis upon God and the Queen. The original aim was to organise and participate in activities, particularly outdoor, that had become associated with the scout movement. ‘Green’ in orientation, they remain explicitly non-confessional, though regional branches often contain notional, nominal, even committed Christians, as well as people from other organised religious traditions. The city branch is a very middle class organisation in terms of membership drawn from affluent areas, and based upon parental occupation.

The groups then, were selected on the basis of particular characteristics outlined above. An arbitrary range of groups or individuals could have been selected to comply with the

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<sup>67</sup> See P. Ainley, (1997:7); Prout and James, (1997:29). They maintain that staying longer in education to accrue more qualifications is an increasing trend across most schools, regardless of class intake. In part, this is related to benefit reductions, which were previously available to this age range.

<sup>68</sup> In this study, class is measured by occupation according to the Registrar General, though it is conceded that this is biased against women, since male occupation is considered the head of the household. The small number of participants in this study allows this bias to be bracketed, however.

<sup>69</sup> This is a claim made by authors such as Wilson, (1966); Gaine, (1975); Martin and Pluck, (1977); Francis and Kay, (1996).

primary research aim: looking for evidence of religiosity in the worldviews of young people. However, several fields were identified for exploration on the basis of these groups. Firstly, whether there are any differences and similarities between Christians and non-Christians in terms of religiosity – whatever this turned out to be. Secondly, to contrast pupils who elected to study R.M.E. and others' studying science, to highlight any differences in religiosity between those studying formal religions and those receiving education in areas where evidence is deemed crucial. Thirdly, to establish whether the WF show evidence of an absence of, or lesser religiosity than their avowedly religious counterparts across the other groups. More generally, to distinguish intra-group differences and similarities alongside inter-group concerns. Finally, 'groups' were selected to facilitate focus group discussions as a significant method of data collection.

It was intended that the gender distribution of each group would be equal. This was not possible since females outnumbered males across all of the groups. Similarly, gaining accurate comparisons in terms of socio-economic background proved difficult. Whilst it is easier to gauge some measure of this on the basis of each group's socio-geographical location (according to the *Townsend Deprivation Index*, for example), this was complicated by the fact that 'members' tended overall to live beyond the area that the groups met. So, for example, although the Evangelical church is located in an Urban Priority Area, the majority of the congregation are not local, but reside in various parts of the city and are engaged in 'professional' occupations.

### 3.2 The Groups

The five groups are listed below with brief descriptions and impressions.

#### **Mainstream Presbyterian Church of Scotland (MC)**

The church is located at a busy junction amidst a new housing scheme, an under-used shopping mall, and 1930's tenement flats. In terms of the city's social geography, it is not situated in an affluent locale, nor one of generalised poverty. Rather, this is an area that appeals to first time property owners. The church imposes itself onto the surrounding social landscape, built in traditional style with stained glass windows, standing in stark architectural contrast to newer satellite buildings.

The interior is similarly 'traditional': lofty, gilded ceiling, and row upon row of uncomfortable wooden pews on two levels, all leaning expectantly towards the main focus of the church. This is the wooden pulpit, flanked by steps to the left and decorated simply with blue and gold cloth bearing the symbols, *Alpha* and *Omega*. Above, the wall is obscured by an alignment of prominent organ pipes announcing the unexceptional organ that they serve. Below the pulpit there are various artefacts suffused with symbolism – stone baptism font, a table where the 'offerings' are placed, closeted by three chairs. There is also a regular lavish display of flowers in hues of purple and white. I noted that the church did not have that old, musty smell which I associate with childhood memories of church.

Members and attendees exceed three hundred, drawn from both within and outwith the locality, including outlying regions such as Midlothian. A substantial proportion of the congregation comprises retired elderly people and those working in professional



occupations, all smartly attired. Their names, addresses and occupations are listed and displayed on a large notice board in the downstairs hall.

Attending the evening service on Sundays, there are usually over one hundred worshippers, including a handful of small children, and at least twenty teenagers, who prefer to sit in the same place each week – upstairs towards the rear. It was difficult isolating a Church of Scotland that had a consistent number of teenage church attendees below school leaving age, a major rationale in selecting this church.

The Minister (now retired) insists in being addressed formally, and presents his sermons in a very serious and authoritative, thick Scottish accent. I did not hear anybody call him by his Christian name. Occasionally he seemed more dynamic and would wave his hands in wild gestures to stress the points he was trying to make. He did not hesitate to interrupt his sermon if a child spoke too loudly; not to listen, but as a firm rebuke aided by a penetrating stare.

The format of the evening service revolved around prayers, scripture study, announcements, ‘offerings’ (during which I felt the strong social compulsion, which I resisted, to empty my pockets in an outward display of generosity exceeding those in my immediate vicinity). Additionally, there was a selection of hymns, none of which I recognised from childhood. They were generally melancholy and uninspiring. The main impression gleaned from attending these services was complete boredom and I could not conceive of myself as *belonging* to a church like this in the absence of corresponding beliefs. I rarely understood the Bible exegesis despite listening intently, and failed to understand the attraction to young people. They also looked bored, passing notes to one another.

After the service an informal tea was held downstairs (served by women). I introduced myself to those standing in close proximity and talked about the proposed research. The standard response to what became a weekly question, ‘are you a ‘visitor?’ was to inform

the questioner of my research. Sometimes it was difficult to elicit conversation thereafter and I instantly became an outsider, though others retained their pleasantness and seemed interested. Fortunately, the young people did not seem at all perplexed by my presence, though they preferred to speak to one another rather than any other adults.

### **3.3 Evangelical Church (EC)**

This church lies on the edge of a designated Urban Priority Area (UPA). Debilitated 1950's council flats and houses sprawl their way in to the distance: dull, dismal, and basic concrete blocks. There is a strong presence of young children flirting with danger on the streets and roads.

On the other side of the church a street meanders, punctuated regularly by small, smart bungalows, some converted with well maintained gardens. This street is something of an anomaly in the area, for behind it skulks another grim memorial to the council's attempt at housing over forty years ago.

Externally, the church is in keeping with the surrounding housing estate, unimposing with a plain, neatly cropped lawn indicating that the church is maintained and alive. A sign outside informs people of its three services on Sundays, alongside a regularly changed poster, signifying Christianity: 'Jesus said, the truth shall set you free'.

Inside, the church hall is comprised of both familiar and unfamiliar features, bright, but plain with customary wooden pews facing towards a raised platform. Its focal point is a podium. To the left, modern band equipment sits adjacent to a small organ, the two styles somewhat incongruous, yet harmonising well when functioning. Above the platform, large plain blue letters read 'Jesus Christ', and below, a piano situated next to a flower arrangement. An unfamiliar element I noted, was the absence of stained glass

windows. Instead, signifying the risks associated with the locality are opaque windows embraced by wire mesh.

The membership level is approximately half of the Church of Scotland above and the building much smaller. Similarly, both members and attendees are primarily drawn from other regions of the city and beyond with a significant proportion of the congregation comprising people from professional occupations, though to a lesser extent than the other church. There is also the strong presence of elderly people.

Of the several Evangelical churches in the city, this maintained its younger attendees with more regularity. I attended the Family Service in the afternoon and the Youth Fellowship (YF) in the evening. These were occasions when younger people are more likely to attend. The Family Service saturates the church to full capacity with approximately one hundred people, including many small children, babies and about twenty teenagers. The atmosphere was lively, friendly and comfortable. Service format includes prayers, which appeared *ad hoc* though sincere, announcements and a Bible story interspersed with a modern day analogy. There were also hymns that were not in the least doleful, but radiant, enthusiastic, rhythmic and uplifting, led by two women armed with microphones and zest. Children and babies occasionally make their presence known in various verbal and physical guises, leaving after half an hour to attend their respective Sunday schools. The service continued thereafter, led by different orators who seemed distinctly 'nearer' and self-effacing than the church above. Satan, however, was generally a prominent figure in the selected Bible readings.

The Youth Fellowship is held in a large room and the format varies weekly, led by a designated youth leader and assistants. The young people also take turns to lead the worship, which includes hymns and prayer. My impression of this church as an 'outsider' was that of a much warmer and fresher experience. It was not as distanced from the congregation, either spatially or otherwise. From my earlier and limited experience of churches, this one contained both familiar and less familiar elements.

Like the other church, people were generally friendly, but there was also some silent hesitation when I mentioned 'research'. Again, however, this did not emanate from the younger people, some of whom I vaguely recognised from some of the schools I had taught in.<sup>70</sup>

### **3.4 Woodcraft Folk (WF)**

This is a voluntary organisation for children and young people aged 6 – 20, offering a programme of various educational activities based on the principles of co-operation, equality, peace and environmental concerns. A literature search into the organisation was not productive, though I have been informed that there is forthcoming research in this area. Recently, web pages have been designed, providing some information about its history and branches. They claim to believe in the principles of co-operation, democracy, equal opportunities and international friendship, their slogan being 'Span the World with Friendship'.<sup>71</sup>

Generally, activities occur on a weekly basis in the hall of a Primary School. The younger WF (Elphins) conclude their activities with a Woodcraft song about co-operation and friendship. The older group (Venturers) are led by two leaders, playing games initially, such as chain-tig - a game of chase culminating in everyone holding hands. The format thereafter, involved a parent teaching a skill or a specific activity to the group. For example, the Alexander Technique for relaxation, Aromatherapy, and silk Thai dyeing. Subject to weather, outdoor games were also played. Occasionally, activities occur in the house of a member rather than a school hall. During summer, activities with other WF across the country occur such as 'rough camping'. In this

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<sup>70</sup> I am not entirely sure whether respondents recognised me from this school. When asked, they said that they did not because I had never been their class teacher.

<sup>71</sup> See Appendix 1 for information about the WF. This explains its original links with the co-operative movement, as well as utilising the folklore of native American Indians. Indeed, the literature search that I conducted produced books and pamphlets from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on how to survive and make the most of natural environments. This was male oriented.

situation, large communal tents, segregated by age and task are temporarily erected in the countryside, again stressing co-operation and the experience of shared learning. This experience could last for two weeks, and members were expected to cook, tidy and attend to their group's sanitation on a rotation basis.

The city group comprised roughly fifteen regular members, mostly female. The atmosphere was relaxed and informal, providing space for members to exercise their own decisions about the activities that they wished to participate in. The WF are currently attempting to determine new ways of attracting middle-aged teenagers. This is the age range most likely to leave, and parents are substantially relied upon to maintain the WF structure and to plan and implement activities.

In terms of class background, members of the WF came from families whose parents worked in professional occupations. They attend either private schools, or the most successful state schools in terms of exam league tables, located in areas of affluence. They seemed well acquainted with one another, each having participated in the WF for at least four years. Their reaction to my presence was indifferent. I was very visible in the context of this small group and had to make considerable effort to interact with them.

### **3.5 School Pupils Studying *Higher* Religious and Moral Education (RS)**

#### **School Pupils studying two or more *Higher* Science Subjects (SS)**

The school selected is a comprehensive Secondary School built in the 1950's and recently refurbished throughout. It is not a successful state school, relative to others, where success is measured by league tables. Its intake from Primary Schools is from four feeders set in areas of considerable social deprivation. The school has a reputation for being both 'sink' and 'rough', also non-academic and containing many pupils with

varying degrees of 'learning difficulties'.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, a small proportion of its school leavers gain *Standard Grades* and *Highers*.

I worked briefly at the school teaching R.M.E. to twelve and thirteen year olds, and taught there whilst the government inspection was implemented. The report described the school as 'an improving school'.<sup>73</sup> More R.M.E. was recommended for fourteen and fifteen year olds in accordance with government guidelines

The popularity of R.M.E. is similar to that of other state schools in the city, though at *Standard Grade* the school claims to have the highest number of pupils in the city which the media were informed about.<sup>74</sup> Most had dropped out however, by mid-term. Generally, there are at least twelve pupils studying for the *Higher*, and they are invariably female. R.M.E. is taught in a department which encourages the personal search aspect of the curriculum, philosophical thinking, and is non-confessional in orientation. The teacher justifies its teaching on the basis that it is important to learn about religions as part of history and present culture; it aids understanding of other faiths and tolerance of their respective adherents, and if it were not studied at school, few children would possess knowledge about religion.

Selecting young people studying science at *Higher* level produced fifteen with a roughly equal gender ratio, though females tended towards Biology and males preferred Physics and Chemistry. Whilst the R.M.E. department was located at the back of the school, science subjects were staged in modern, well-equipped classrooms. Science was popular with the pupils, and R.M.E. markedly less so. One way of measuring the social importance and rating of a subject is to attend a school parents' evening. I noted that very few parents visited the R.M.E. teacher, whereas Science subjects together with Maths and English held prominent queues of parents, anxious to speak to teachers about

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<sup>72</sup> The term 'sink' refers to a school with a poor reputation in all areas such as exam results, and their ability to retain permanent teachers.

<sup>73</sup> See HMSO report document 1998.

<sup>74</sup> See *Scotland on Sunday*, 14.09.97.



their son/daughter's progress. This is a primary indicator of subject hierarchies within the British educational system, each accorded varying degrees of value. Moreover, the location of the R.M.E. classroom and the finance allocated in contrast to science is a further indicator of its low subject status reflected in the general school ethos.

### 3.6 Reflections On Youth, Religion and Methodology

[A] consensus seems to be emerging that for qualitative researchers generalizability is best thought of as a matter of the 'fit' between the situation studied and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of that study. This conceptualisation makes thick description [Geertz, 1973] crucial, since without them one does not have the information necessary for an informed judgement about the issue of fit (Schofield, 1993:221).

According to Thompson (1988) little is known about the religious behaviour, and significance of religious beliefs to the everyday life of large sections of society. Moreover, a wide range of religious studies have been conducted in the quantitative tradition, relying ultimately on church collated statistics.<sup>75</sup> Debate continues to proliferate over the merits and demerits of research that is quantitatively or qualitatively oriented.<sup>76</sup> The two broad approaches are not essentially inimical, but potentially, and often actually complimentary, as is indicated by other research.<sup>77</sup> Research methodology is best not considered in terms of either/or; if research focus is considered as a black box, then the researcher has at her disposal a methodological toolbox to

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<sup>75</sup> See Luckmann (1967) who argues strongly against the dominance of this approach.

<sup>76</sup> Bryman, (1992); Francis and Kay (1996); Lofland and Lofland (1995); Dey.(1993). Luckmann argues that quantitative approaches to the study of religion are inadequate because they represent. "institutionally defined doctrines and theological positions . . . all too easily the identification of church with religion leads first to operational shortcuts to religion, via segregated opinion items on doctrinal matters, via "quantified" affective loads with respect to ecclesiastical organization and the like" (1967:25).

<sup>77</sup> See Pope and May (1993); J. Brannen (ed.) (1992).



expose its contents. However, this research indicates that both topic and focus determine the selection of particular methodological tools.

This thesis is based upon qualitative methodology, incorporating a range of approaches to the study of religion/religiosity, which aim to go beyond the head counting approach. These techniques provide both depth and vibrancy of insight into expressions of religiosity and the way that this may contribute to meaning making in the worldviews of young people.

Non-institutional religion is difficult to study, for it is often by definition, private and covert. Whilst surveys can reveal the numbers of people who profess a belief in x, y, and z – highlighting trends – they cannot reveal the rich complexities of religiosity, for example, modes of expression. A qualitative approach is, therefore, more pertinent and desirable though can prove problematic as researchers in the field concede. Indeed, Wolffe (1993) has found that many people find talking about religion an embarrassing experience because of its personal nature, a theme that emerged as a substantive issue in this current research. Similarly, Hay and Brown point out that

People are loath to surrender privately held beliefs to strangers. . . [P]eople tend to get very apologetic or embarrassed about their 'spiritual' experiences because of a perceived stereotype that exists in our secular society which seems to conclude that people who have religious experiences or supernatural beliefs are naïve or single-minded (in D. Cheetman, 1995:105).

The preceding quote has utilised the term spiritual in relation to private beliefs and the supernatural. This term is discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

The context of questions asked by researchers in their interview schedule are similarly crucial in eliciting responses, whatever the methodological inclination. For example, one survey in 1982 commissioned by the Bible Society concluded that only 7% of people claimed to have no religion, whereas a *British Social Attitudes* survey the

following year, arrived at the figure of 31%.<sup>78</sup> The latter included questions on other substantive themes that constituted the bulk of the questionnaire, in contrast to the former that addressed religious questions entirely. Responses given depend in part upon the context and the wording of questions, whether these are accessed through surveys or interviews. This is an issue addressed in the construction of the research design, ensuring that questions were not solely concerned with religiosity.<sup>79</sup>

Qualitative approaches in the field of religion and young people are crucial for two reasons. Firstly, little is known about the religiosity of teenagers. Most research in this area focuses on Christianity or ethnic traditions and their level of assimilation into British cultures.<sup>80</sup> Correspondingly, this calls into question the issue of what religion/religiosity actually is. That is, whether there might be evidence outwith institutional forms. Secondly, quantitative surveys that focus on social attitudes exclude the 'middle-aged' teenage years, though recently there has been some inclusion of this age cohort. Unfortunately, the focus on religion has been small and confined to forms of institutional beliefs.<sup>81</sup>

Francis and Kay, prolific researchers of Christianity and young people, utilise quantitative techniques to promote 'scientific rigour' (1996). They claim to have developed and improved upon earlier attempts to explore teenage religion, such as Loukes (1961) and Goldman (1964, 1965). The reader is left with the sense though, that in rigorously attempting to conform to a scientific model, their case is overstated as *the* appropriate manner in which to study religion. Furthermore, by inference, their claims

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<sup>78</sup> K. Thompson, (1988).

<sup>79</sup> See Appendix 2. The interview schedule was divided into sections on base data; religious views/beliefs; church-going behaviour; leisure, school and work; present and future concerns.

<sup>80</sup> For Christianity see Francis, (1984a; 1984b), Francis and Kay (1996), Gill, (1992; 1993; 1994) Levitt. (1996). For other religions in Britain (not New Age) see Ballard, (1994); Lewis, (1994); Jacobsen, (1997); T. Mohood *et al*, (1997).

<sup>81</sup> For instance, a study exploring young people's attitudes included questions about religion. Unfortunately, this only concerned institutional religion, and questions were asked in the presence of parents. This may have affected the quality of responses given.

raise the problem of what a scientific model is, or might be anyway.<sup>82</sup> Ethnographic and a general array of qualitative research methods can provide either complimentary, or free-standing depth and richness of insight into phenomena studied.

Francis avoids qualitative techniques because of their alleged subjectivity and inconsistencies, criticisms commonly levelled at this type of research. In particular, his concern focuses upon the loss of interviewer direction. Moreover, the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee is asymmetrical (1996:166). These concerns resonate across more general debates within the social sciences. Bourdieu (1996), for example, argues that research is a game initiated by the researcher who sets the rules (1996). Similarly, Clifford questions the end-product embodied in the report, querying the textual authority in the act of writing the research: "The writing of ethnography, an unruly, multi-subjective activity, is given coherence in particular acts of reading. But there is always a variety of possible readings . . . readings beyond the control of any single authority" (Clifford, 1983:14).

In 'pure' ethnographic research, these concerns are valid, though Clifford veers towards an embracement of the postmodern emphasis of celebrating difference and exploring particularisms with their limitless array of meanings. Precautions can be taken as a defence against acute asymmetry, however, and against exerting excessive authority through writing - reflexivity and sensitivity, for example. The preferred method here has been that it is legitimate to allow respondents to 'go off' on tangents, particularly in an area of investigation that is not fixed and requires openness. This flexibility can be positive, facilitating the emergence of unexpected data as well as encouraging respondents to feel at ease, lessening the feeling of inequality. This broadly Rogerian (1951) approach is non-directional, though the interviewer does need to direct within a predefined framework (for example, an *aide memoir*) as moderator. That is, she already knows which issues she wishes to explore and in listening keenly can take advantage of

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<sup>82</sup> See Chalmers (1992).

spontaneous trajectories and seemingly *ad hoc* remarks,<sup>83</sup> whilst simultaneously guarding against ramblings by gently bringing the interview back to focus.<sup>84</sup> This is particularly important for research with young people, in a twofold relationship dilemma, distanced by interviewer role and age.<sup>85</sup> Bryman notes that

Inevitably the interviewee will 'ramble' and move away from the designated areas in the researcher's mind . . . [In rambling] the interviewer is losing some control over the interview and yielding it to the client, but the pay-off is that the researcher reaches the data which is central to the client (Bryman, 1988:67).

Excessive focus on unequal power relations in research implies a feeble view of respondents, inferring their dis-empowerment in the research process. One corollary is that they are culturally determined and acted upon (socialised), when in fact the entire process can be one of varying social interaction. Barnes (1979)<sup>86</sup> has drawn attention to the potentially exploitative aspects of the research encounter and maintains that social scientists have become extremely sensitive to issues of power dynamics, urged in particular by feminist literature.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, some respondents may view the research encounter as a means of publicising some political cause, or as a psycho-analytical exorcism. For example, one respondent persistently discussed his girlfriend, attempting

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<sup>83</sup> The decision by the researcher to ask particular questions, though always open to revision, refutes the idea of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theory does not merely emerge from the data whilst theories and concepts are suspended. The literature search and 'hunches' inform the questioning strategy. Without this loose framework researchers would not know what they were looking for. However, as Silverman suggests "grounded theory offers an approximation of the creative activity of theory-building found in good observational work, compared to the dire abstract empiricism present in most wooden statistical studies" (1993:47). Correspondingly, for Bryman, "the term is often used as a way of conveying the notion of an approach to the generation of theory which is derived from a predominantly qualitative research base" (1988:85).

<sup>84</sup> For example, 'Can we go back to what you were saying earlier about x. You described it in terms of a, b, c'.

<sup>85</sup> Solberg also raises the issue of age and status, though advises bracketing age so that researchers can move their attention away from the manner in which our society depicts children, and engage with them on their own terms (1996:36 and 53).

<sup>86</sup> Specifically, Barnes argues that the post-war period reveals a shift in power interests amongst social scientists and their subjects of study. People were beginning to question the value of research and whose interest it really represents (*Who Should know What?* 1979).

<sup>87</sup> See D. Reay 15.4.96. 'Insider perspectives or stealing the words out of women's mouths: interpretation in the research process'. Also Holmwood (1996) details the impact of feminism within the social sciences post-1960's.

to direct his own agenda periodically. This does not suggest that he lacked power in the interview encounter; on the contrary, he was attempting to exert some control over the topic whilst I was obliged to work hard to maintain the interview focus. This then, represents an instance of interviewer/respondent negotiation, a theme highlighted by Solberg drawing attention to the saliency of negotiating research roles with children and young people (1996:37). Qualitative research involves social relationships in which being reflexive and methodical can help offset some of the distortions of the relationship.<sup>88</sup>

One of the problems in interviewing teenagers, or using any technique to elicit information, is locating a language appropriate to the respondents' levels of understanding. Moreover, language itself (discussed in the introduction), can be problematic in several ways. In particular, people often have difficulty expressing their thoughts on religion because of the ineffability of language and its relation to experience.

In a previous study exploring young people and belief, Martin and Pluck (1977) suggested that humans speak in a

language of the cerebral, of fact and of proof. Against it has evolved . . . an emotional language of the private and the personal. But what has got crowded out is a language which modern society will regard as valid in which symbol and ritual can be described and expressed. Thus most young people have no adequate vocabulary to explain and justify much of their own symbolic behaviour (1977: 59).

Though there may be some validity in the preceding quote, its content is not only applicable to young people but to people generally. For instance, it is not at all clear whether all or some 'adults' possess an adequate vocabulary to explain and justify *their* symbolic behaviour. And, who is to decide what constitutes adequacy? Social science is not neutral, a point previously conceded. Indeed, social science may espouse claims

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<sup>88</sup> See Bourdieu, P. for a discussion of reflexivity in the research process (1996:18).

of science and objectivity, but social scientists are part of the society they seek to deconstruct. Studies promote particular interests at the expense of others; those wielding power determine what constitutes adequacy.<sup>89</sup>

A recent Finnish study explored the concept of 'worldview' in a study of its development amongst young people (Helve, 1993). Worldview as a concept, like religion, is abstract and difficult to dissect. Helve's study has resonance in the context of this research, since it isolates young people's beliefs in the supernatural, exploring 'folk-type' beliefs. Helve points out that worldviews are often inconsistent, particularly amongst young people, and are partly inherited from significant others such as friends, family and teachers. Moreover, worldviews are "in constant interaction with [the] environment . . . continuously receiving information from it" (Helve, 1993:18).

Academic explanations have distinguished the worldview, *welthild*, from the *weltanschauung*. The latter is more explicit and tangible since the individual has made a conscious attempt at structuring reality: an example would be Marxism. The religious worldview accords more with the former, *welthild*. Despite discrepancies in the delineation of worldview, the concept, like religion, suggests broad areas of commonality: notably values, beliefs, feelings, behaviours and social and political aspects. There are also connections here with Taylor's (1989) conception of moral frameworks.<sup>90</sup> However, the notion that all individuals, particularly those belonging to the category 'adults', possess a clear and cogent worldview is problematic and indicative of a desire to categorise and systematically classify not only nature and objects, but also ourselves as human beings.

The implication of research driven from this perspective is that once adulthood is reached, people mysteriously become rational, capable of holding a system of beliefs

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<sup>89</sup> See Gouldner, A. *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970).

<sup>90</sup> Taylor argues strongly that contemporary moral frameworks are problematic since they are so numerous: "a framework incorporates a crucial set of qualitative distinctions. To think, feel, judge within



that they have consciously chosen and can account for. Further, that they are able to make sense of things non-problematically.<sup>91</sup> A further point is that young people may not lack an expressive symbolic vocabulary at all, rather that much of their vocabulary is reserved purely for interaction with each other, youth-speak, which occurs in private outwith the adult realm. If this is the case, then adults may have difficulty accessing this, though one way of gaining *some* access might be through establishing a relationship of trust, achieved through more than one meeting with the respondents.<sup>92</sup> Trust can never be achieved entirely, particularly in the usual understanding of the term, deriving from friendship formations over unspecified time periods and experiences. However, more than one meeting with respondents can diminish a sterile research encounter. This is a further point accounted for in the research design, having undertaken some participant observation with the groups, following this with a further three stages. In the school, however, contact with respondents was minimal. Though I did not teach any of them directly, we saw one another occasionally at school benefiting from some visual and in-passing familiarity. The avoidance of direct teaching precluded the potential contaminating effect of over-familiarity that Helve's research suffers from, having been a teacher of her pupils/respondents for several years, producing a situation in which respondents might voice 'expected' responses to her questions.

Extensive respondent quotations have been used throughout in a bid to allow the respondents to speak for themselves as far as possible, considering that

the most fundamental characteristic of qualitative research is its express commitment to viewing events, actions, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of the people who are being studied (Bryman, 1988:61)

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such a framework is to function with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us" (1989, pp. 19-20).

<sup>91</sup> Bloch (1990) argues strongly that much human knowledge is not expressed through language anyway, and that many concepts are principally formed independently of language. Only under certain circumstances can this non-linguistic knowledge be transformed into language as explicit discourse. When this does occur, it changes its character in the process. An example might be learning to play an elaborate instrument and then trying to explain the process of playing.

<sup>92</sup> Hay, 1982: 105.



What goes in and what is left out of an account is always subject to criticism that focuses upon the manner in which research is presented textually. This is particularly true in relation to the researcher/author's construction of discourses, representation and presentation of 'the other', specifically the textual embodiment of authority.<sup>93</sup> Allowing the respondents to speak for themselves as much as possible is one of the central merits of qualitative research, a strategy used by Willis to good effect (1977; 1990).

Conversely, the issue of representativeness and typicality is raised, particularly in relation to case studies and qualitative research generally. Often considered problematic, Bremen (1992) suggests that the researcher should study more than one case to be representative, as this research has done. Indeed, generalisation may not be a problem at all, because

Within a case study a wide range of different people and activities are invariably examined so that the contrast with survey samples is not as acute as it appears at first glance . . . [Moreover] the issue should be couched in terms of the generalizability of cases to theoretical propositions rather than to populations or universes (1992: 90).

### **3.7 Research Design**

The literature search informed the research design, having indicated a paucity of research on young people and non-institutional religion. This justified the methodology since the research available was overwhelmingly either statistical, dated (Loukes, 1961, Goldman, 1964, 1965) and/or social-psychological, incorporating a developmental bias. This stance implies that children under fourteen are incapable of thinking in mature ways – 'maturity' being a social construction juxtaposed against the immature. Moreover, in similar tradition, Kohlberg (1981) outlined stages of moral development, which he claimed could not be reached until the mid-teens. These perspectives present children who fail to meet established criteria as "having unstable, transient values, no

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<sup>93</sup> See for example, J. Clifford (1983), pp. 118-146 esp. 120, 122, 124, 139.

real concept of 'the good', of death, of their future, or their likely future values" (Alderson, 1995:77). Stage theories like this are essentialist and biologically informed.

### **3.8 Ethics and Negotiating Access**

Prior to, and during the research process, all participants were informed about the study and at each stage were given the opportunity to opt in or out. They were told why they had been selected in relation to the research topic, and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and provided with an address and contact number. Before their agreement had been sought, letters were sent to the appropriate parents, churches, schools and organisations, introducing myself, stating the research aims and requesting consent. In effect, whilst I selected the groups initially, respondents within the groups were subsequently self-selected.

The school acted *in loco parentis* for the two school groups until the final stage (individual interviews). At this point, phone numbers were required to arrange interviews and permission requested from the Director of Education. The ethics involved in this research conform to the guidelines established in the 'Code of practice for Research involving Children' from the Centre for the Child and Society, University of Glasgow (see Appendix 3). This is also influenced by Alderson (1995) who details extensive detail about ethical standards of research with *children*, a term legally incorporating babies to those in their late teens (1995:49).

Gaining access to potential participants for this research was a thoroughly negotiated process. To access the church groups, either the minister (MC) or the elder (EC) were contacted initially. With the EC group, subsequent negotiation occurred through the

Youth Leader Subsequently, the young people were asked if they wished to participate and letters sent to parents asking them to contact me should they decline consent.<sup>94</sup>

The Church of Scotland was not helpful in facilitating access. The minister was about to retire and a new one was being elected. Since this consumed much of the elders' and congregational time, several different office bearers were assigned. Arranging a focus group was impossible. The church hall could not be used unless it was agreed that at least one elder was present during the discussion. I considered that this would inhibit responses and suggested its re-location at someone's house. Composing letters to parents requesting a volunteer had no effect. Thereafter, I was asked to leave all arrangements to a specific elder.

The WF had been difficult to access formally since there are no city headquarters and parents rotate their duties. Eventually after three months of waiting, punctuated by letters and phone calls, permission was granted to observe activities. The procedure for gaining access was similar to above.

Negotiating access with the school groups was quicker and less complicated. The issue became the responsibility of an Assistant Head Teacher (AHT), who organised the times, dates, locations, refreshments, and even the pupils themselves, ringing them up to remind them about interviews. I explained the study to them before they completed the questionnaires, by letter and in person, (as above), having selected them by subject from the school's SCAMP system (school computer system).

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<sup>94</sup> Everything appeared to proceed unhindered until the individual interview stage. The Youth Leader asked the respondents *not* to speak to me on a one-to-one basis. Respondents thought that this was because as Youth Leader, he was not allowed to be in a room alone with any one teenager, for legal reasons. Fortunately, five of the respondents did agree to be interviewed, with the knowledge that they could withdraw at any time and that I would not challenge their beliefs. These were conducted in their own homes with their parent(s) consent. On no occasion was I ever in a house alone with one respondent, though the interviews occurred in private spaces.

One obstacle not adequately considered was the intervention of exams. This meant that pupils had study leave and a busy work schedule. Some were also due to leave school.

Confidentiality and anonymity were stressed throughout, as was the opportunity for anyone to withdraw at any time. Focus groups and interviews were tape recorded to aid recollection and transcription.

### **3.9 Hanging-out**

Stage one involved 'hanging out' in various locations where the groups assembled to acquire a feel for such aspects as group dynamics, interactions, and to generally observe group activity and behaviour. Also, to allow respondents to feel relatively comfortable so that they were not 'cold' in interviews. The aim was to increase the possibility of good rapport when the interviews eventually occurred. This also evoked an experience of the atmosphere of the various locations and activities. It is acknowledged, however, that I am a situated being: from a specific socio-economic background, age and gender, and would therefore not share the experience in the same manner, intensity or level of taken-for-granted-ness as the respondents. Solberg maintains that researching children (and young people) is improved in instances when there are occasions to interact in a common medium of interaction. This improves relationships with the participants. Moreover, being 'new' to an activity, such as churchgoing, can provide clues for reading the negotiations that children participate in (1996:37).

Participating with respondents in their various activities raises the problem of reactivity, that is, the extent to which the researcher's presence affects the studied environment.<sup>95</sup> This is impossible to avoid entirely, since researchers are also social actors. The main purpose of observation was to increase familiarity between respondents and researcher.

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<sup>95</sup> See Denzin, N. U. (1978: 200).

It was interesting to note, moreover, that the respondents, especially the small WF group, were involved in observing me.

Visiting churches was strange, not having been since childhood. As a nominal Christian until the age of nine or ten I attended church. My memories centred on a mixture of boredom, stuffy smells, feeling cold, excitement, elation and horror at the crucifixion. Several churches were visited before selecting two for study, based upon the number of teenagers regularly attending. As an adult, I still sensed boredom but also a little elation and some appreciation of church architecture.

### **3.10 Questionnaires**

Stage two consisted of self-completion, semi-structured questionnaires (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire began with the particular – biographical details, and moved to more general questions. The questions about church-going routines and possible indicators of religiosity were interspersed with broad-spectrum questions such as leisure interests, politics, hopes and aspirations. It was intended that twelve questionnaires would be administered to each group, but this was not possible since not all groups comprised twelve people. Overall, forty-eight were administered and returned.

The rationale for the construction of these questionnaires was to allow respondents an opportunity to think about some of the issues to be discussed during interview. Researchers rarely consider the inverse of what they take-for-granted. That is, they spend considerable time formulating research questions. Conversely, it seems fair that respondents are afforded a similar privilege.

### 3.11 Focus Groups

The third stage utilised focus groups to explore perceptions about general religiosity (see Appendix 4). This is a recent innovation in the social sciences and gaining in popularity. The small size of the groups and the fact that they knew one another confirmed their suitability for this research technique. Wilson (1997) has proposed that the following considerations are adhered to in the process of focus group discussions: they should be small in size (to distinguish them from group interviews), and they should include a trained researcher in either a directive or non directive capacity. They should occur in a non-threatening environment on a selected topic for between one and two hours (V. Wilson: 211).<sup>96</sup>

There is no clear consensus as to whether in-depth interviews or focus groups ought to precede one another. Both have the merits of drawing out, or upon, emergent salient themes. Sensitivity to emerging issues can also occur through participant observation prior to focus group discussions. One of the primary advantages of focus groups is that

compared with individual interviews, focus groups help to break down this power relationship between researcher and respondent . . . [Moreover] reconceptualising the focus group interview as a discussion amongst respondents, the researcher goes some way towards 'democratising' the process and it is more likely that more naturally occurring language will result in what still remains a socially contrived situation (V. Wilson, 217).

I decided to meet respondents in their focus groups initially and conduct individual interviews subsequently, to allow further familiarity. Some respondent reticence contributed important data to the overall thesis. Whilst respondents were relatively comfortable with one another and consensus was reached on certain issues, and less so on others: in particular the identification of stereotypes – a specific area fundamental to the entire research– remained concealed. This is explored in Chapter 7 on religion and

identity. This provides further justification for adopting triangulation, since had the interviews not occurred after the focus groups, certain information pertaining to religion would not have been available. As Wilson advises, in the focus group we know what respondents are willing to divulge in the company of their peers (1997:219). We can also add that without some follow up, it is unlikely that we would know what they would *not* divulge in the company of peers. A follow-up will not automatically ensure this, but it provides an opportunity for further elaboration and the clarification of possible misunderstandings.<sup>97</sup>

The disclosure of shared understandings in relation to perceptions of religion was a central motive in selecting focus groups as a method of data collection. Morgan confirms this, since “group discussion facilitates the emergence of shared understandings. . . [P]eople can recognise hidden parts of themselves in others. They can also reconstruct their own life narrative from others’ stories” (1997: 211).

### 3.12 Interviews

Following the focus groups, individual in-depth, open-ended interviews occurred (see Appendix 5). Each interview began with a word association ‘game’ as an ‘ice-breaker’ so participants would feel relaxed, and to initiate thinking about issues discussed. Some of the questionnaire responses and focus group responses were referred to, and respondents were able to view their questionnaire to remind them of responses. This allowed a final opportunity to elaborate earlier answers. It also endorsed any

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<sup>96</sup> Further advantages of focus groups and their relatedness to 1950’s group interviews are explored in *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the state of the art* D. L. Morgan (ed.) (1993) Sage. See in particular, ‘When to Use Focus Groups and Why’ D. L. Morgan and R. A Krueger, pp.3-20.

<sup>97</sup> The school groups were conducted in a smart seminar room, whilst the EC focus group took place in the home of one of the respondents. Her mother was extremely hospitable. The WF focus group occurred in a classroom located in close proximity to the hall where the remainder of the group carried on with their activities. I was unable to convene a focus group with the MC for reasons explained. Each lasted for approximately one hour.



questions they might wish to ask. Several declined an interview, but twenty-five youngsters across the groups consented.

Interview sites were negotiated with respondents and the appropriate bodies. The school groups were interviewed in a cramped room in the school, whilst all of the other respondents were interviewed in their own homes either at the week-end or early evening. Staging an interview on familiar territory goes some way towards creating a non-threatening environment within the context of the interviewer/interviewee relationship. These interviews provided rich information, augmenting previous disclosures as well as revealing new data. Communication through body language, as well as tone of voice and intense willingness to speak showed that by this stage respondents were comfortable in the interview setting. Indeed, it became common (possibly because I was getting better at it?) to encounter difficulties in closing the interviews. Talking for about an hour or more about the meaning of life, death, religion and parents, exposed them to the exploration of profound subjects, normally 'back stage' in life. This provoked them into thinking and perhaps verbalising thoughts on these issues for the first time. Drawing the interview to a close took time, and I allowed them to discuss anything as a means of winding down and orienting back to their taken-for-granted reality. Generally, exams and university were discussed. One respondent revealed so much of her personal life that it was decided not to include her interview for reasons of confidentiality, though everyone had this guarantee.

Nearly all respondents commented after the interviews that they had genuinely enjoyed the experience, in particular talking to an adult other than teachers or parents about their thoughts and concerns. All were offered transcripts either to comment upon, or retain. None returned comments. However, two transcripts were not sent. One belonging to the female above and another female who feared her father might hear her responses during the interview. This precaution was taken lest a parent or other family member inadvertently read the contents. Some of the interviews revealed personal details about

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family dynamics and the decision not to send two transcripts was premised upon the promise of confidentiality and an interest in their well-being.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> See Alderson (1995) who explores children's rights and responsibilities on the part of researchers. The document also explores ethics and parental rights amongst others relevant to the research process.

### **3.13      The Pilot**

Piloting of questions was conducted with a group of ten respondents selected from a comprehensive school. They conformed to the appropriate age-range and comprised six females, and four males, studying *Higher* R.M.E. This allowed questions to be re-formulated, added or deleted. The group deconstructed all of the questions after completing the questionnaire, distinguishing possible meanings and/or misinterpretations that some people might have with particular questions. Their advice was considered and thereafter the term 'spiritual' was incorporated as an area of exploration.

A similar approach was adopted with the focus group and six individual interviews. Some of the data from the pilot has been utilised in the thesis, in instances where the questions retained consistency across the groups. Sean, for example, features prominently in the section on spirituality. Morgan and Krueger (1993) claim that if a pilot goes well, there is absolutely no reason for the data to be excluded. The group was extremely helpful throughout the pilot, exhibiting a genuine interest in the research.

## Chapter 4 Considering Religion: Something in the Background

### 4.1

*Dan [RS: INT]: Back where I come from everyone is influenced by religion . . . When I came over here, not so many people were religious. I mean they don't go to church or anything.*

In the Religious Studies (RS) focus group, Dan spoke with an obscure Scottish accent. Originally from Bosnia, he had lived in Scotland with his parents for four years. He contrasted religion between the two countries:

*[RS: FG]*

*Dan: Over there it's like part of your every day life; here it's more like something in the background.*

*Jane: But [Christianity] used to be like that here . . . It's like, traditional . . . It's like before there were people emigrating, Christianity was the only one religion for the whole of Britain. And there were no other religions until people started going to the Eastern countries, and people from Eastern countries came to us.*

In subsequent focus groups and individual interviews, participants indicated firstly that they thought immediately of Christianity when asked to consider religion. Secondly, that religion is diminishing: something in the background, as Dan suggested:

*Tom [SS: INT]: I suppose it's dying out now, religion. Even in the catholic schools, I don't think it's as strong as it used to be.*

*Corrienne [RS: INT]: Churches, Christianity. New Age religion. Buddhism seems to be quite popular. Well, not cults, but witchcraft is becoming quite / people are getting interested in that / [Religion is] A group of people looking for some goal,*

*trying to achieve something. I think when you do mention the word religion, the first response is Christianity.*

Primarily, discussions centred upon religion as Christianity. Whilst most comments were consistently negative across the non-Christian groups, the inverse applied with the Christian groups. The data in this chapter suggests the erosion of conventional religion/Christianity in the imagery it evoked amongst non-Christian respondents. Across the groups, respondents identified aspects of Christianity mediated through five main tributaries: the Primary school; the Secondary school; churches; friends and family; and public places, to a lesser extent. Within these, subsidiary trajectories are considered where they have affected perceptions of religion more generally.

#### **4.2 Primary School: believing what you're told**

*Christine [SS: INT] . . . In Primary School you sat and sang songs about God and everything and you didn't have a choice in that . . . We'd all go to assembly, but we had this couple of people in our class who were [from] different religions and they went away to a wee room to sit. I thought that was wrong. I think Christianity's the one main religion that's preached upon.*

The 5 - 14 curriculum administered to Scottish schools states that one of the central aims of Religious and Moral Education is to help pupils “develop a knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other world religions and to recognise religion as an important expression of human experience” (SOED: 1992:2). The world religions referred to are Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. Indeed,

[I]nspection since 1986 has revealed that there is considerable variation in the extent to which these areas are covered in Primary Schools. In nearly all schools Christianity is accorded appropriate emphasis as the main religious tradition of Scotland (SOED, 1994:7).

Emphasis upon Christianity rather than other world religions is justified since it “has shaped the history and traditions of Scotland and continues to exert an influence on national life” (SOED, 1992:1). Given that Christianity is the leading convention in determining the content of R.M.E., it is not surprising that the respondents focused on Christianity as a central feature of memories of religion at Primary schools. Other religions were rarely suggested except in reference to pupils excluded from ‘Christian’ assemblies.

Respondents exchanged Primary school memories of Christianity. Exposure was through assemblies, during which pupils were expected to participate in hymns, prayers, and listen to Bible stories. In addition, specific teachers obliged pupils to say prayers and listen to Bible stories in class.

[SS: FG]

*Sophie: We were sort of brought up with that [Christianity] at Primary . . .*

*Kerry: We were just told that [Christianity] was true; when you're small you just accept it, like the teachers are saying it so it must be the truth; so in a way you could probably say that's brain washing.*

*Grant: My Primary Two teacher, Mrs. Widdicombe, she always made you in the morning have a prayer . . .*

*Esther: She was really into it, like.*

*Grant: Every morning of every day.*

*Esther: They force it on you as well.*

Within this group, compulsion pervades memories of Christianity. Respondents highlight the susceptibility of primary aged children to the beliefs of adults, particularly those such as parents and teachers. Beliefs during Primary were generally commensurable with parents and significant others. However with age, being religious was considered ‘uncool’ particularly within school confines.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Being categorised as uncool is something that children attempt to avoid across different contexts. Markers of difference are generally avoided. See Connell ‘Cool Guys, Swots and Wimps: The Interplay of Masculinity and Education’ for school based discussions around this theme (1993).

In the RS group, the majority had also been brought up with Christianity to varying degrees at Primary school. Overall they considered that its influence diminishes and is directed more toward the younger Primaries. It was relayed through similar mechanisms referred to above. As with the other focus groups, teachers were viewed as being imbued with authority and truth. The issue of 'no choice' was similarly highlighted:

[RS: FG]

*Jude: The thing is you believe the stories like, about Jesus, you believe it but then you start to actually think about it when you're in the bigger Primaries and go on to Secondary; and well, for me, I just sort of / a lot of rubbish.*

*INT: Did you believe?*

*Jane: I suppose yeah, you do, cause at Primary school you tend to believe everything, well you know, you're at a young age.*

*Jude: Yeah, what the teacher says you just believe it.*

*Jane: Yeah, but teachers seem to teach it as if it was TRUE, and that it, I mean may be they didn't believe it, I don't really know but . . .*

*David: Especially at our school, we had a teacher who was like / Church of Scotland and you know . . . it's just she MADE YOU say prayers and that in the morning, and things like that even if it wasnae your belief . . .*

Relaying memories of Primary school and Christianity, Tom expressed similar observations:

*Tom [SS: INT]: Your mum and dad were sort of figures that told you what to do, and at school you're expected to learn and everything they [teachers] say is expected to be right. That's why I don't think they should have it taught in Primary because you'll believe in it. Teachers tell you to trust [them] that you've to learn what ever they say . . . They had Ministers come in every now and then, assemblies every week. Even one teacher read the Bible every morning to class. She was really quite bad, a real believer in religion . . .*



Amongst the Woodcraft Folk (WF), Catherine had learned about Christianity at a Rudolf Steiner Primary school, and claimed to have found the stories interesting though not convincing. Whilst the remainder of this group claimed never to have believed in Christianity, Michael admitted to having been a nominal believer. Unlike the dis-believers in the WF group, one of his parents remains a practising Christian.

*Michael [WF: INT]: In Primary school I went along with it because everyone else did. You got into trouble if you didn't sing. I don't think it's on to make everyone sing Christian songs, because obviously some of them weren't [Christians]. There were a couple of Jewish people and Asian folk, who clearly weren't Christian but they had to do it anyway . . . You had to say the Lord's Prayer in assembly. I guess I did believe in God in Primary School because I didn't know any different.*

*INT: Did you believe Jesus was the Son of God?*

*Michael: Yes, because that's what they were all saying*

*INT: And did you believe in heaven and hell?*

*Michael: Yes.*

During the pilot discussion, Christianity was considered functional for young children. This specifically related to the issue of death and bereavement. The idea of heaven was presented as fundamental to a child's belief system, the effect being to comfort children rather than telling them the 'truth', as some of them adduced. Children lack adequate coping mechanisms to deal with the 'truth' about death, justifying eschatological beliefs. Sean, whose father had died when he was a child, disagreed:

[Pilot FG]

*Melanie: It's something you automatically say, they're away to heaven, a better place, it's just something that comforts a youngster*

*Sean: That's just you being hypocritical [angry]*

*Melanie: As they get older they'll realise that they can change their view that their mum, dad, whatever's, not in heaven, but at a young age they need something to comfort them, and know that they're not just . . .*

*Claire: Dead.*

Above we see links to Berger's notion of a 'sacred canopy' (1969) where religious beliefs fulfil a human need to make otherwise senseless things meaningful. Most of the non-Christian respondents had been nominal Christians during the first few years of their Primary Schooling, or what Hornsby-Smith refers to as customary Christians (1991). The school is strongly implicated as an elementary mediator of Christianity, and specific teachers recalled as playing a major role as transmitters. Christianity infused school activities substantially, becoming a normal part of this activity, one corollary being that current church-goers had not generally encountered difficulties with their Christian identity within Primary school parameters since this was part of the school ethos.

Recollections of Christianity from Primary school are textured by language expressing lack of choice and believing what one is told, suggesting that as young children respondents were passive and malleable, possessing little agency. Some claimed that they privately questioned Christian beliefs at a young age, though more decisive reaction began towards the end of Primary, a finding also recorded by Francis and Kay (1995).<sup>95</sup> Most however, believed in central tenets such as God and heaven when younger, as Levitt (1996) also found in her study about children and church schools.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Teenage Religion and Values* (1995) presents the results from a study in England and Wales. One finding was that children become more critical of religion as they aged particularly in years nine to ten.

<sup>96</sup> In *Nice when they are young*, Levitt, (1996) found that many parents brought their children up with Christianity for a variety of 'non-religious' reasons, such as teaching values..

### 4.3 Heaven: you have to be good

*Lindsay [RS: INT]: Yes, I believed in heaven. If you're a good girl you'll go heaven when you die.*

One of the central beliefs associated with early memories of Christianity is belief in heaven. In this section the data illustrates respondents' earlier ideas about heaven based upon recollections from Primary school. Like religion, this can mean different things to different people. Heaven is an interesting concept to explore since both Christians and many non-Christians share this belief, though the content differs.

Gill's recent compilation of longitudinal statistical evidence from Britain, indicates that in the 1990's, 51% of adults professed belief in heaven (1998).<sup>97</sup> This level has altered little since the 1970's. Disbelief in heaven over the same period, however, has increased from 33% to 40%. Though this type of data is useful in identifying trends, it is unable to reveal respondents' conceptions of heaven. The questionnaires in this study indicate that fifteen currently believe in heaven, ten are unsure and eleven disbelieve. The sample contains eleven Christians. This ambiguous finding became clearer through subsequent discussions that indicate a shift in respondents' interpretations of life after death. Perceptions of heaven are distinguished from terms such as 'life after death', a concept explored in the Chapter 6 since this is associated with different correlates

Non-Christian respondents in the pilot had talked of heaven as an ideal and of eternal life with the God as a reward for leading a good Christian life. Some tacitly accepted this image at Primary school age; currently however, this is something that 'others' believe in. Similarly, respondents in the Science Studies (SS) and the Religious Studies (RS) groups perceive an association between heaven, God, and being good. Conversely, hell was referred to, though to a lesser extent:

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<sup>97</sup> The figure is substantially higher in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic and the USA (See BSA:1992/3).

Grant [SS: INT]: *God. Jesus. The afterlife. Resurrection. Hell. You have to be good.*

Christine [SS: INT]: *Heaven? I think of God. You were always told when you were younger it's a place where you go if you've been good in life. You get to go to heaven. I always think about it up in the clouds or wherever. I'm not sure if I believe that. I don't know, I think it's a myth that people believe . . . I don't believe in hell, that's definite. But I don't think I believe in heaven. It's nice for people to think there's a place where you go. That's what it's there for, just a comfort . . . I think I probably believed it, because you don't know what's right or wrong at that age, and you kind of listen to everyone else. If you're told all these stories then you begin to believe it.*

Elaborations were similar across the RS group:

Lindsay [RS: INT]: *Heaven. The idea that everyone goes to this place once they're dead if they've been good and they can do all their favourite things, all the time and be happy.*

David (Jehovah's Witness) explained his post-death beliefs:

David [RS: INT]: *. . . there's a certain class that will go to heaven to rule with Christ's Kingdom when it comes, but a certain amount will remain on earth. Not everybody will go to heaven.*

In the WF group, though Catherine claimed to have never been a Christian, she conveyed uncertainty about heaven, remarking that her parents taught her *not* to believe:

Catherine [WF: INT]: *I don't know if I believe in it. I guess it's a happy place but I don't know . . . People can go there because of what they've done in life. I don't think that's right. If you're taught not to believe in God, you're not going to believe*

*in heaven; if you're not taught right and wrong, you're not going to know right from wrong; it's not really your fault. I guess heaven is somewhere people like to think they're going to go and feel better.*

Some non-Christians revealed belief in heaven in their Primary school accounts, though none had believed in hell. Heaven evoked images of an ideal state of happiness with God where actions in life determined entry. The belief was perceived functionally as a socially constructed device to ameliorate anxiety about death, but was discredited during the transition to Secondary school.

#### **4.3i Christians and Heaven**

Both Christian groups expressed belief in heaven and its antithesis. Correspondingly, both had difficulty articulating heaven. Whilst David in the RS group had conveyed a sense of predestination, respondents in the EC proved uncertain of their entry to heaven in contrast to their MC counterparts:

*Martha [MC: INT]: I don't know. No one knows really. I think it'll be beautiful and I'll just be so happy and I think you'll have like, new bodies and everyone will be / no one will be feeling sick or anything; but you'll know people there, somehow you'll know them, even your relatives that died, and I think it will be brilliant.*

*INT: Do you believe in hell as well?*

*Martha: Yes. Everything that's bad in the world, everything that people get scared of, everything that's evil. Everything like, there would be no kindness, there would be anger all the time; everything that the devil is would be down there. No one would like each other, you'd be on your own. There would be nothing there.*

[EC: FG]

*Thomas: It concerns me that IF I do go to heaven, then I'll feel guilty for not telling everyone I've met about God . . . If in heaven I'm able to see people I know are in*

*pain, then although it says in the Bible that you won't have sorrow or stuff, I just can't comprehend how that works.*

...

*Jill: We believe there is a God [but] you've always got this fear that if you don't go to heaven you'll definitely go to hell.*

Their talk about heaven indicates a sense of salvational crisis, fraught with anxiety over whether they have acted properly and told enough people about Christianity. Though Thomas criticises the uncertainty about heaven amongst Jehovah's Witnesses, he is not free from uncertainty about his own ultimate destination. The main contrast between Christians and non-Christians is that for the former heaven definitely exists, as does its counterpart, hell. The body and its renewal are a significant component of this belief. Conversely, most of the non-Christians dismiss heaven as an ideal construct designed to alleviate ultimate anxiety, though some profess uncertainty about its existence. It is clear that belief in heaven continues to be a central belief in Christianity propagated by Primary schools. Many children believe this at some point, claiming that as with Christianity generally, teachers and some parents present this as factual.

#### **4.4 Secondary School Transition: believing what you want**

*Christine [SS: INT]: When you get out of Primary School and find new people, where religion doesn't play such a part in that school, you're finding your own way. Also your family has a lot to do with it as well. At Primary School you did, I think at one point, believe. I wouldn't consider myself religious. It was just what I did; not out of choice either.*

Like discussions of religion at Primary School there was little reference to religions other than Christianity, nor of Religious and Moral Education generally. A limited cognisance of other religions and R.M.E. emerged in some of the individual interviews. The pilot group discussed believing in some of the Christian teachings as

children and the role of the school minister preaching about Christianity. They maintained that Christianity is associated with immaturity; as the transition to Secondary school occurred they were exposed to other ideas and viewpoints, culminating in a rejection of Christian beliefs:

[Pilot :FG]

*Melanie: People told me stuff like that when I was younger and I'm not religious now.*

*Lucy: Aha.*

*Melanie: You change your views, but that [religion] gives them [children] something to look at when they're younger.*

The suggestion that this rejection occurs during the transition from Primary to Secondary is confirmed across the non-Christian groups, and also by Francis (1995). There was an implied expectation that people ought to dispense with religious beliefs as they aged, any enchantment with Christianity turning into disenchantment and contempt during the transition.

Secondary school stands accused of mediating Christianity amongst the SS respondents. Like Primary school, there is an element of compulsion. Assemblies perturb them in particular.<sup>98</sup>

[SS: FG]

*Esther: Even at Christmas we had to sit through, erm, religious assemblies.*

*Sophie: Aha . . . It was Christianity that's all it was; it wasn't any old type of religion.*

*Esther: . . . we thought we'd get the choice but we didn't, WE HAD TO sit through it, we could have got the choice cause we are old enough.*

*Sophie: We didn't even realise it was gonna be like that, we just sort of, we were told we were going to assembly to be befrienders,<sup>99</sup> and we thought, 'oh fine'. Then all of*

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<sup>98</sup> Francis and Kay (1995) found that 73% of young people disagreed that schools should have a religious assembly every day. Their reasons were not probed, but this does not automatically imply that dissent is always for religious reasons.



*a sudden this like, minister, chaplain of the school started talking, and I knew who he was from RE, so I knew what he was gonnae talk about, and I was like, 'OH!'.*

The RS group attend the same school as the SS group, but had not implicated the Secondary school as a transmitter of Christianity. One reason may be that RS group study religion and are more inclined to take its presence for granted within the school. Conversely, the presence of religion outwith subject boundaries is perhaps more obvious to the SS group. Nevertheless, both convey similarly that they had stopped believing in Christianity during the transitional stage between schools. However, subsequent individual interviews revealed some contradictions. Jane had talked about believing everything at Primary school along with most of the others, primarily because of the teachers' role, suggesting that she no longer believes in the Christian teachings. Yet she remains a committed Christian, an aspect of her identity that was not apparent in the group discussion. She had said previously in the focus group:

[RS: FG]

*Jane: I suppose as you get older and you start to come to Secondary school, you kind of don't do things like that, at least I don't remember doing anything like that.*

*INTJ You mean the assemblies and the prayers?*

*David: Nah, it all stopped when we came here.*

*Jane: I mean, I suppose it didn't change for me cause I wasn't getting them at Primary, so it didn't change much . . . [RE] doesn't sort of key in to so much to like the stories you had heard in Primary school, so you kind of think may be they were making it up.*

David gave the impression that he also stopped believing at some point in the transition to Secondary school. However, his individual interview revealed that he had been brought up, and continues to be a practising Jehovah's Witness. This was not at all apparent in the preceding focus group.

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<sup>99</sup> This is a scheme in which senior pupils are allocated to new pupils to deal with any informal

Similarly, whilst Jude claims to have been a believer at Primary (because of the way it was presented by teachers), she had only finally rejected Christianity several years into Secondary school after her grand-father had died. It is quite probable that the process of rejection had started toward the end of Primary – along with other peers – and then into Secondary. But it took a deeply significant event for her to completely reject it on the grounds that she could not believe in a God who would allow her grandfather, a committed church-goer, to suffer.

Dan rejected Islam on similar grounds of theodicy. In Scottish culture he observed an ideological element pervading school assemblies. Non-Christian pupils were obliged to participate. The pluralistic Religious Education perplexed him: in Bosnia a Christian would learn about Christianity, and a Muslim about Islam. He spoke of his former religion:

[RS: FG]

*Dan: . . . I lost faith . . . it was after the war. I just cannae be bothered about it any more.*

*Jude: I suppose that would change your perspective on virtually everything.*

*Dan: Nah. I mean my grandma's still religious. My parents were never religious any way, so . . .*

*Dan: I don't know. It's more like, if there's a God what's his job? I don't know like. Living where he lives just laughing at us. It's like why doesn't he do something about the world or something like that?*

The issue of religion and identity is explored in Chapter 7. It is worth reiterating at this point, however, that despite the people in this group having studied religion together for at least two years, two of them denied any association with organised religion. This discomfiture is related to the general school perception of being religious, combined with the notion that beliefs ought to be private. Their sense of ridicule is revealed through their talk of Christmas assemblies:

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queries about the school.

[RS: FG]

*Jane: If they were to make it optional, no-one would go like.*

*David: That's right.*

*Dan: Yeah, they cannae make you go.*

*Jude: Yeah, but the people who would want to go wouldn't go 'cos they'd get slagged about it.*

*INT: So you think a lot of people aren't interested in them?*

*David: I'd say the majority.*

*Dan: The majority yeah. You see that Christmas thing? half of the kids just laughed!*

Similarly, Sophie's (SS) comment informs us of the religious stigmatisation that people endure within school parameters:

[SS: FG]

*Sophie: If you stood up in this school and announced you were religious, you'd probably get like, KICKED IN.*

*[Group laughter]*

Ridicule within the school is also identified in Levitt's study. Interviewing one mother about her son's attitude to Christianity, she quotes " 'at the senior school they are called 'Jesus Creeps' if they do anything religious. They have to be tough to stand up to that' " (1996: 140).

Across the WF group, religion is correspondingly conflated with Christianity and to a lesser extent, other types of institutional religion. They insisted that as people age, their interest in religion inevitably diminishes – an observation confirmed by other respondents. Reasons range through a fusion of the biological and the social:

[WF: FG]

*Pippa: . . . A lot of people reject their religion and a lot of religious people we know now probably won't be quite as religious once they reach, say, university age and beyond.*

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*Peter: The thing about religion, in quite young people, is that it is very likely to change during the late teens and things because of hormones.*

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*Michael: They also get insulted for being 'Bible bashers'.*

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*Catherine: Yeah, when I was younger, if you said, like in my Primary school, you'd probably get slagged.*

Some respondents talked of a personal identity crisis at their respective schools incumbent upon being Christian. Children and young people work hard to 'fit in' to their school culture and this can cause great anxiety.

*Thomas [EC: INT]: . . . at Primary school . . . I tended to get picked out as being excluded and people tended to bully me. Because it was a local school the kids knew I went to church and I remember at the end of Primary seven (just a couple of weeks before the end of term), I stood up to someone and they said, 'Och, you go to church!' and I turned round and I went, 'yeah!!'. And because I didn't give in to them putting me down, they sort of went, 'oh right, OK' and they just sort of left it, because I'd stood up to them and said, 'yeah, I'm not ashamed of it'.*

Thomas appears confident, leading prayers and playing in the church band. He attends a private school in Edinburgh where being Christian is generally a more acceptable part of the ethos. These factors may have eased his identity sensibilities.

Talking about school, Steve claimed in contrast:

*Steve [MC: INT]: It's so difficult to fit in . . . I don't think I've really changed, except I don't talk about it as much . . . I don't feel I share it as much with my friends.*

Similarly, Martha has difficulties at school because she is Christian

*Martha [MC: INT] . . . it gets a bit hard sometimes at school, because people say things to you.*

Both Steve and Martha attend different schools within the state system, and do not exude the same degree of confidence as Thomas. This suggests that a committed Christian identity may be a problem for many young people in the school situation, particularly if they lack confidence (discussed in Chapter 7).

In distinction to non-Christians, most Christians argued that the transition from Primary school had strengthened their faith:

*INT: Was there a certain point where you would say you became more religious or spiritual?*

*Thomas: Erm, probably about the age of ten or eleven . . . Well I'd been sort of, I think it's just a state of maturity, into Secondary, and just with the realisation of more and more things. And also there was, I became a Christian when I think I was eleven, when Billy Graham came to Murrayfield . . . Before that you could probably say, I probably still would have said I was a Christian, but I hadn't really made that step forward where I was able to comprehend what I was saying.*

Correspondingly,

*Steve [MC: INT]: I was probably less religious [at Primary]. I wasn't concerned with what my religion believes in . . . Whereas now, with issues it matters . . . Probably about first to second year. It's probably because your parents have always decided for you, but now they don't, so you've got to make your own mind up . . .*

Catherine similarly conveyed an intensity of Christian beliefs during the transition to Secondary school:

*Catherine [MC: INT]: I'd say [it was] the end of first year when I went to Scripture Union Camp and I thought this is it, I can finally become a Christian and when I was speaking to a man and he was trying to answer a question, I could answer about how it felt, and I could answer them all, and I just thought, I already am one, cause I just know this is how I feel.*

Research in the 1960's exploring children and their religious beliefs focused overwhelmingly upon developmental theories in an attempt to explain religious and moral development, or the apparent lack of it. In particular, research was based upon conceptual cognitive stages employed by Piaget (1932), briefly referred to at the beginning of the thesis. Loukes (1961) attempted to debunk the position of Piaget and the relationship of stage theory to religious understanding, by suggesting that teenagers can make sense of religious propositions and problems of meaning. Subsequently, Goldman (1965) revived the ideas of stage theories in an attempt to discover whether religious concepts developed through differentiated stages of conceptual understanding. Indeed, Goldman claimed to have found a correlation between mental age and an increasing capacity to deal with religious concepts: hence with age, a transition from concrete to abstract thinking occurred.

The stage theorists attempt to explain human behaviour has already been criticised, since it suggests that many children – as they enter 'adolescence' – are incapable of comprehending religious concepts. The lack of comprehension apparently correlates with a stage of reasoning driven by biological age. The problem with stage theories is that they underestimate the extent to which children can understand concepts associated with religion, and more abstract and symbolic thinking generally. Robinson's Religious Experience Research Unit (1978) support the view that children are capable of an understanding which exceeds the Piagetian and Goldman type analyses. Furthermore, analyses of religious understanding based on the Piagetian model do not explain why the majority of teenagers reject Christianity in

particular or any other religion, unless this is incumbent upon maturity, however defined. Are we to assume that those who embrace religion are only those who *understand* religious concepts and ways of being?

Stage theories ignore factors such as social class and the language which children use to communicate – Bourdieu's (1977) cultural capital for example.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, factors such as ethnicity, locality and regional variations, as well as gender are downplayed or ignored in stage theories. One example is Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (1981). This is rebuked because the stages are not only Christian-centric and echo a middle class voice, but are gender biased in their interpellation of an apparently gender neutral subject. The 'subject' is in fact male, mirroring the universal (male) citizen that arose from Enlightenment debate.<sup>101</sup> Such theories suggest a unilinear model of development. Subjects are positioned from the same vantage-point and any deviation or inability to move beyond a particular stage is problematic. Children are considered less as possessing agency and more as products of adult cultures. Moreover, they are considered in ahistorical and universalistic terms, a flawed perspective over-emphasising biological effects upon personhood.

Francis and Kay reject stage theories, urging socialisation theory as an explanation for negative attitudes toward Christianity:

What appears to be taking place is this. As young people leave the world of childhood, they are absorbed incrementally into the world of adulthood. Today much of the world of adulthood is characterised by the secular rather than by the religious . . . The socialisation process is persistently drawing young people in to the ethos of [a] post-Christian world. In this sense, to be irreligious is to be normal (Francis and Kay, 1996:144).

However, they fall short of considering the implications for human agency in socialisation theories. An over-emphasis upon socialisation theory tends to neglect and undermine the agency and choice of people generally. There are indeed social factors that impinge upon young people's evaluations of the religious beliefs they

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<sup>100</sup> Bourdieu explains cultural capital in his discussion of *habitus* as a set of dispositions sedimented through the socialisation process. Cultural capital derives from cultural resources such as education (1977:72, 95)..



have been raised with. However, negative attitudes towards Christianity cannot be construed as merely inflicted upon people, since this suggests total lack of agency. People possess agency and within structural parameters, reject, modify or discard these beliefs. It may not be religion that is being rejected *per se*; rather, it is Christianity itself which young people construe as restrictive. The fact that most people discard their Christian beliefs and develop negative attitudes toward religion and Christianity is partly based upon experiences throughout Primary school, a factor highlighted in this research. Rejection continues and is augmented by experience in Secondary school where different knowledge claims are experienced, together with increasing independence and deviation from teachers and parents. To deduce that it is normal to be irreligious is taking a step too far, unless we consider religion *only* as Christianity.

Increasing independence during the teenage years does not necessarily lead to the rejection of Christian beliefs. For the Christians in this study, independence provides them with an opportunity to attend Christian camps and events, reinforcing their faith. These experiences are identified as catalysts in enhancing their faith. The data suggests then, that the transition to Secondary school reinforces the faith of some young people where they are from committed Christian families. These people have been regular church-attendees with parents and siblings since early childhood. Evidence suggests that children and young people are more likely to attend church if their parents also attend church regularly. Familial plausibility structures appear to be crucial factors in the continuation of church attendance amongst young people. Indeed

when both parents attend church regularly, the influence is stronger than when only one parent attends . . . Parental church attendance . . . is the strongest contextual influence on the development of adolescent attitudes toward Christianity (Francis and Kay, 1996:150).

The data in this thesis exhibits negative attitudes towards 'being religious' within the school. These negative attitudes are confirmed by some of the Christians who have experienced stigmatisation. Both Christians and non-Christians are aware of the risk

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<sup>101</sup> See Carol Gilligan ([1982] 1993) for a feminist criticism of this approach.

of ridicule if their school identity deviates too much from the mainstream. In particular, the culture of the school attended by the RS and SS respondents militates against professing a religious identity. All pupils play their part in this culture and wittingly and unwittingly sustain it; for example, David and Jude's denial of their own religion within the focus group. Correspondingly, some of the Christians' insistence that they are 'normal' in their actions and dress at school actually retains the notion that there is something not normal in being Christian.

The idea that people ought to believe what they want is common to all respondents. Everyone is opposed in principle, to inflicting beliefs upon others, indicating a considerable change in stance to that of the 1960's and earlier. There was also some implication that beliefs are formed in a vacuum; that they can be framed independently of external influences such as parents and teachers. Indeed, talk about teachers in the same context as Christianity relays vehement opposition to authority within the school context. Correspondingly, there was irritation from some respondents that Christianity at Secondary school continues to be part of school culture, imbibed through school assemblies. The assemblies, however, are never more than weekly events and do not involve singing and praying as they had done at Primary, yet continue to be considered in a similar dim light.

Secondary school is implicated as a transmitter of Christian beliefs mediated through its general culture, though to a lesser extent than Primary school. On a more formal level, science as a bounded and distinct school subject is considered largely counter-intuitive to religion. This is explored in the following sub-section.

#### **4.5 Science and Ultimate Questions**

Amongst respondents generally, there was little debate about scientific versus religious understanding and knowledge claims. Some people in the RS group felt

that religion generally retains its relevance in providing answers to ultimate questions juxtaposed to a more prevalent scientific worldview. Religion and science are considered as dichotomous discursivities each attempting to answer abstract questions, though in a different manner: science asking 'how', and religion asking 'why'. However, respondents were unanimous in thinking that science provides more definitive answers based upon claims of evidence. Moreover, they argued, science is not attempting to dictate people's behaviour.

Two male participants in the pilot group alluded to scientific referents when explaining why they no longer hold Christian beliefs:

*Grant [Pilot:INT]: I just think about it and there's no evidence for it and you just must die. I mean, natural selection and all that stuff.*

The influence of science within Secondary school was discussed amongst the WF group as invalidating religion. Science and religion were perceived as largely incommensurable. Peter struggled to understand religion because scientists cite compelling evidence for their theories, and Michael, who had recently completed SYS in physics agreed:

[WF: FG]

*Peter: . . . Scientific proof has proven like a lot of the Christians main beliefs are impossible.*

*Michael: Everything in the Old Testament just doesn't follow with all this evolution and stuff.*

*Peter: A friend of mine doesn't even believe in evolution! . . .*

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*Peter: Religious people come up with the argument like, how could the universe have just been created?*

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*Michael: They've proved with like physics and stuff how everything just traces back through its movement like, traced back to a single point, everything sort of comes together and that like almost proves this Big Bang theory that they've got going.*

Tom identified science as a factor in his rejection of Christianity:

*Tom [SS: INT]: Science classes at the Secondary school got me interested in science. Doing biology, watching documentaries on the TV you see a lot of things. When I think about it, if we evolve from these bacteria, how could God have done all this? . . . I think it's science that can prove anything. When I think about how we got here, just go back to the primordial things.*

Whilst respondents in the science group (SS) do not show less of an inclination towards religiosity compared to the RS group, the issue of creationism versus evolution emerges more strongly. Reasons given for favouring the latter view alternate between the content of biology lessons at school, and the dissemination of media information. The RS group were more willing to concede that creationism and evolution are not dichotomous.

To some Christian respondents, science and creationism are not necessarily inimical. Conversely, to non-Christians, science is a strong factor in their rejection of God and creationism.

#### **4.6 Church and Sunday School: rabbiting on**

*Michael [WF: INT]: I went to church when I was ten to thirteen and I found it rather boring . . . Nothing interesting happened. You just go, the minister speaking about stuff I didn't believe in. In between speaking, sang a couple of songs . . . The music was not my scene really. I didn't like it much.*

The conviction that church is languid and irrelevant to modern society is consistently expressed across the non-Christian groups.<sup>102</sup> Awareness of social issues on which the church is considered to have imposed its voice emerged in the pilot, the SS and the RS groups. In particular, those in the latter and the pilot group referred to church condemnation of homosexuality. Discussion centred upon 'the church' as a homogenous entity rather than specific denominational distinctions. This was common to all non-Christian groups in their discussions of church:

[Pilot FG] (on homosexuality)

*Helen: If it's what someone wants then Christianity should have nothing to say against it, it should let it be. It's just that person's decision, it's nothing to do with them.*

*Kylie: It's their choice if that's what they choose to be. We should all just do what we want to do.*

Other respondents similarly objected to what they considered a moralising stance from churches, as well as an ineffective social role:

*Dan [RS: INT]: Church? / a dark miserable place [laughs]. . . They're just like kind of modern capitalists, just after money. . . just trying to get money out of people and support themselves.*

Most non-Christian respondents were pessimistic about churches:

*David: [RS: INT]: I get negative all the time with churches. Just, I think they are intimidating . . . It should be about being able to feel relaxed and maybe, you know, feel sort of enlightened; but you feel awful sort of, you know like you shouldn't be here, I think. I have a sort of weird feeling about them as well, I don't think they're Godly, if I can say that . . .*

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<sup>102</sup> Francis and Kay found that 30% of respondents agreed with the statement 'the church seems irrelevant to life today', whilst a further 46% were uncertain (1995:187).

*Pippa [WF: INT] Boredom and singing songs at Sunday school. I didn't understand what was being said. It didn't seem to relate to me.*

*Lindsay [RS: INT] . . . The teachings are far too old fashioned. You can't understand them. It's all about what happened thousands of years ago and there's nothing about now. And no one really cares what happened then. They want to know about now and it's not relevant. The church is a building where old people go, sing hymns and listen to the Minister rabbiting on for a while.*

Conversely, a small minority of respondents enjoyed the sensation of being in church, despite not being church-goers:

*Tom [SS: INT] I used to go to church when I was at Primary but I think that was because we were made to go . . . I didn't enjoy going, just one guy stood up and spoke for two hours about the same thing. You just lose it and don't concentrate. You don't get involved in anything, just listen and go home. . . . I think [now] it's quite fascinating sitting in churches. They look really nice and have a sort of religious feel. It's like you're almost speaking to God; there's almost something there. It's like the emptiness and the smell.*

In the SS group, discussion centred upon Sunday school in particular. Four of the group had experienced Sunday school – two whilst accompanying parents to church:

[SS: FG]

*Tom: Eventually you leave when you've had time to make up your own mind, and you're not gonnae force your son or daughter to go to Sunday school now.*

*INT: When do you think you're old enough to make up your own mind?*

*Esther: When you know what else there is, cause if your parents are religious and they bring you into the world religious, you don't have much choice, you're just that, and you don't get to learn about the religions. But I think you need to make your own choice and it's when you know what else there is and what you believe in. then you can make up your own mind.*

Participants shared the view with the pilot group that beliefs ought to be private.<sup>103</sup> Phrases such as ‘preaching at’, ‘brainwashing’, and ‘shoving it down your throat’ were indicative of their feelings about the imposition of Christianity into their lives. Indeed, the term brainwashing is generally familiar in anti cult rhetoric, and less so in their observations of mainstream Christianity.<sup>104</sup>

Images provoked by religion were similarly adverse in the RS group. Foremost were images associated with Christianity, particularly for Jude and David. The church was perceived conceptually as authoritarian and restrictive, and their view of the Bible was a book suffused with rules and commandments. Christianity was deemed boring for teenagers and prohibitive to the modern teenage lifestyle:

[RS: FG]

*David: A lot of people our age associate religion with boring as well.*

*Jude: Sitting in a church, singing old hymns, an old stuffy place with lots of old people.*

*David: When you’re younger you just want to go out and party.*

*Dan: . . . if you were a Christian you wouldn’t do the things you normally do.*

People in the SS and the Pilot groups noted the elderly composition of church congregations. Similarly, the idea that living life as a Christian is boring and prevents the adherent from participating in a modern teenage lifestyle, textured the narrative of the non-Christian groups, though countered by Christians (both former and current).

Jude had been a Christian until fourth year of Secondary school and defended Christianity against lifestyle restrictions:

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<sup>103</sup> Levitt also found high value accorded to the autonomous individual and “tolerance for individual, private belief but criticism of church-goers” (1995: 14).

<sup>104</sup> See Barker on cults and a critique of the concept of ‘brainwashing’ (1984).



*Jude [RS: INT]: I went to church until about fourth year. Fourth year I was drinking and going out and doing whatever.*

Simon was similarly keen to explain that Christians are normal, arguing that the consumption of alcohol as a teenager is a prime indicator of normality:

*Simon [EC: INT]: . . . I have a drink every Friday. Me and Andy get six cans of lager and I stay at Andy's . . .*

He elaborated, to illustrate that young people from his church are 'normal teenagers' and not merely Christian:

*Simon [EC: INT]: Do you know Catherine? . . . She's a wee rebel, she's as bad as me. I think it's because of her age . . . Yeah, Catherine, so-called perfect family. When we were doing that discussion [focus group], she wanted to come out with something but she thought everyone thought differently.*

One of the WF participants who claimed to have been a church-goer, had stopped during the transition to Secondary school. His statement for leaving was typical:

*Michael [WF: INT]: I just stopped cause I didn't know what they were on about and I didn't like it at all. I didn't believe in it either.*

The questionnaires show that most respondents had been church-goers whilst younger. Of those interviewed, only three claimed to have never been to church (they were in the WF group). The main reason for respondents ceasing church activity were disbelief in the church's teachings, closely followed by the view that the service was boring. Francis and Kay found similarly that 51% of their respondents thought that the church was boring, though reasons were not specified in detail (1995:187). There was some correlation with disbelief in the church's teachings and the transition to Secondary school, discussed earlier. Leaving church generally occurred earlier than the rejection of Christianity in its entirety, confirming

Gill's (1998) conjecture that belief in Christianity has taken longer to decline than church-going rates.

#### **4.7 Church-going: getting a boost**

Church is important to all Christian respondents. In the EC for example, if an individual had not attended for some time, feelings of guilt would ensue. Indeed, the group acted in a manner that adduced this guilt by telephoning the transgressor for an explanation. Attending church propelled them for the rest of the week according to Thomas, and for Jill it was time off from the rest of society, especially school, which she deemed as characterised by conflict.

The communal aspect of Christianity is significant, captured in Catherine's definition of religion:

*Catherine [EC: INT] People's beliefs, I guess what they cling to. It's like a community thing, just belonging and believing in something. Like supernatural but different, bigger, more important than people; believing in something that's more important than people.*

Attending church confirms their collective identity as Christians and also teaches practical lessons transferable to daily life. The Youth Fellowship group is crucial, though one criticism is that people tend to cluster into respective age groups. The importance of sociability within church life itself in sustaining motivational factors has been raised in Chapter 1 (the Kelley-Bibby debate). Certainly at this particular church, children and young people are provided with regular opportunities and space for socialising.

By contrast, members of the MC lack specific activities for youth other than a Bible class:

*David [MC: INT]: It's not really a young people's church, it's pretty bad for young people support.*

Despite the lack of specific youth activities, attending church is considered fulfilling by these respondents:

*Catherine [MC: INT] You get support there from people, you just ask people rather than read the Bible, about issues that you were wondering about and just companionship with someone that has the same belief, and also you get the Bible explained to you.*

They lack a forum through which to contest aspects of Christianity, primarily because they are only together for Bible study and occasional camps. In this sense their church is more conservative than its Evangelical counterpart.

There is no evidence of 'switching' amongst the church-attendees interviewed, a theme also introduced earlier in the Kelley-Bibby debate. All had been attending the same or similar type of church from an early age, and despite some reservations about aspects of their respective church, claim contentment. Indeed, most travelled a considerable distance to reach their church destination, excluding locality as a primary determining factor in church choice. Catherine lived farthest away and had attended an Evangelical church in her local area, in contrast to the Church of Scotland. She outlined the difference between the Evangelical and mainstream church:

*Catherine [MC: INT]: . . . more outspoken, whereas in our church, we tend to say, take bits of the Bible and say, 'well can you really more prove it than disprove it. In [an evangelical] church it's much more // erm, for maybe people who were interested in Christianity would go along to that sort of thing . . . this is the basics of Christianity and this is the happy side, it's not getting in to details really.*

David confirmed a similar sentiment in his interview:

*David [MC: INT]: [Our Church] is more for Christians who know basic beliefs and they want to know more in depth, but it's not for first timers . . . it's for people who already know about Jesus and want to know more.*

Church-going continues to be important to all the Christian respondents, confirming and nourishing their collective and individual Christian identity. Some felt that this could be boring at times, but everyone attributed high value to the collective participation.

#### **4.8 Public-ising Religion**

Talk about religion in public spaces other than the church was limited, though most recalled instances when they had encountered people proclaiming religion – busy shopping areas, for example.. In the SS group, an association of coercion with Christianity coloured their views, not only based upon experience at church and Sunday school, but also experiences in more public places. Christianity and some other religions (notably Scientology), are increasingly visible in public space – on streets and the city centre, as well as people proclaiming salvation at their door:

[SS: FG]

*Sophie: . . . you see people in the street. One time I was in Glasgow and we were shopping and we saw that [to Kerry] remember? That man, and he was just like preaching, and that's how I see that whole religion, just trying to brainwash you, and it should be your choice . . .*

*Tom: There's people come to your door selling you leaflets . . . They dunnae really say who they are, just say, 'do you believe in God?'*

Tom referred to Scientology, his views reflecting general ill-informed public fears about 'cults':

[SS: FG]

Tom: . . . Church of Scientology, er, I heard about, there's a place in Edinburgh somewhere. . . on the Bridges somewhere. I dunnae ken what's meant to happen there. All I heard was my dad telling me to stay away from it . . . I've heard they're weird . . . I cannae mind who it was, one of my pals said they brainwash you or something like that.

Grant: I think I've heard that.

Tom: Aha. [our RE teacher] said that once as well.

Again, the theme of hostility towards what they consider, 'being preached at' is raised, together with the idea that people ought to keep their beliefs private. The city is particularly 'busy' with various religious groups during the summer festival, a trend that none of the respondents refer to. Most of their knowledge of Christianity and other religions is mediated through friends, family and school, both directly and indirectly.

#### **4.9 Friends and Family: discursive networks**

In the WF and EC groups, participants discuss Christianity with their friends at school, indicating a significant level of interest in religion generally and Christianity specifically.

Catherine, whose parents had been church-goers, was interested in the church. Her parents had never taken her and she felt she might be missing something. Pippa shared these sentiments:

[WF: FG]

Pippa: There might be something you're missing . . . for example, a Supreme Being.

In common, all sought to explore the religious beliefs of those close to them. Michael restricted his queries to his recently re-converted father, whereas Peter wanted to understand why some of his friends believed in the teachings of Christianity. Catherine's main concern was the possibility of going to hell, an issue that she often pressed with friends. Both she and Pippa claimed that this was a question that their Christian friends appeared apprehensive about:

[WF: FG]

*Pippa: I asked one of them once and I said, 'am I gonna go to hell?' and she said, 'no, because nobody's tried to convert you', and I went, 'why's no one trying to save me from hell, then?' and she's like, she didn't answer that one; it's like it makes sense that they would presumably try and save everyone, by converting them, but they don't really.*

Talk about Christians centred on stereotypes. For example, Catherine described a friend whom she described as 'really religious':

[WF: FG]

*Catherine: . . . she just, won't work on Sundays cause it's like God's day and she wears a little band saying, 'what would Jesus do?'/ she's meant to look at it when she gets angry or something.*

*Pippa: Or when she has a maths problem [sniggers].*

*Catherine: Yeah, it's a bit, it's a bit, it makes her happy.*

*Michael: Seems a bit far-out to me really.*

*Catherine: She's nice though.*

*Pippa: She's like er, singing religious songs around a campfire with her guitar type person.*

*[laughter from females]*

Discussion amongst the EC about their friends and Christianity confirmed some of the observations above, with questions about salvation prominent. Most people in

this group expressed concern about the thought of their friends going to hell. Samantha, talking about death commented:

[EC:FG]

*Samantha: I'm not scared, though I think of all my friends and they'll be in hell, and I think they'll be looking for me.*

*[laughter]*

*Marie: It bothers me as well, I hate thinking about that, it sometimes comes up . . . I remember once we were in PE and this subject about dying and where you went comes up and somebody asked me and she went, 'do you think when I die I'll go to hell then, is that what you think?' I was like, 'yeah' [laughter] and they're like shocked, saying 'I'm not a bad person'. And it's a hard thing to explain to people or tell people what you believe in I think.*

Whilst there is evidence across the groups of interest in particular aspects of Christianity with friends, there is also evidence of family influence upon religiosity generally and issues pertaining to Christianity specifically.

#### **4.10 Keeping it in the Family**

Francis and Kay (1995, 1996) claim that family influences play a major role in shaping attitudes toward Christianity and that where one or both parents attend church, the children are more likely to attend. The interviews show a marked correlation between parental religious beliefs and church-going behaviour amongst their progeny.

In the WF group, Catherine claimed that her parents had taught her *not* to be religious and that she had never been a church-goer. However, she expressed some interest in Christianity and religion more generally. Similarly, Peter's mother had not been a church-goer nor had she encouraged him to attend. By contrast, Michael



had been a church-goer with his father when younger. His father had stopped and during the transition to Secondary school, Michael rejected Christian beliefs, though his father had recently resumed his. Pippa had never been to church with her family, any experience having been through attendance with friends after a sleep-over. Though she was interested in exploring her friends' religiosity, she claimed to be an atheist and rarely discussed religion at home:

*Pippa [WF: INT]: I've always been an atheist, except I didn't realise it until late Primary School . . .*

*INT: Do your parents ever talk about religious things at home?*

*Pippa: No, not really . . . I wasn't really aware of religion until I was older and by that time, you know, I'd made up my own set of beliefs and things.*

*INT: So at what age roughly, would you say that you definitely decided you were an atheist?*

*Pippa: About eleven . . . I just remember going through a stage of thinking about it, and thinking, 'no, I don't believe in God'.*

Talking about her parents,

*. . . both of them went to church when they were younger, both of them never believed in God. And both rejected the church when they were fairly young.*

Christian respondents discuss their religion at home within the confines of their family, and primarily with their mothers. However, this is not to say that non-Christians do not discuss religiosity at home. Some of them do engage in such discussions, a theme explored in the following chapter on spirituality. What is suggested from this section, and will become clearer in the following chapter, is a link between home and personal religiosity. The following material presents limited knowledge of religions other than Christianity, largely mediated by school.

#### 4.11 Other Religions

*Michael [WF: FG]: There's a lot of religions and I don't go for any of them. Religion is often used as an excuse for violence. Israeli's and the Palestinians and stuff. It's obviously very powerful to make a lot of people feel better about themselves.*

Respondents in the RS group, having studied religious systems in more depth than other respondents, commented on Buddhism. They found this appealing due to its lack of monotheism, and because they consider the values and beliefs less restrictive than Christianity. Initially however, thoughts about religion had evoked imagery pertaining to the church, and also war:

[RS: FG]

*David: Church.*

*Jude: Church. God [group laughter] God! ha! Jesus . . .*

*Dan: War.*

*INT: Why war?*

*Dan: Dunnoe.*

*David: It causes so many.*

*Jane: [ Commandments, rules.*

*Jude: The Bible.*

*Dan: Rules. The Bible*

*David: [&] well maybe not religion itself, but people's interpretation of religion and different sorts of opinion cause war, specially in foreign lands, not so much here but*

*Jane: Ireland.*

Dan elaborated further about war in his individual interview:

*Dan [RS: INT]: Religion. Huh! Fighting over nothing. I mean the origins of different religions and all that, if you traced them back they all originated from the same thing, like people worshipped nature, like, they all basically share the same*

*ideas. It's just people saying, 'my religion's right, your religion is wrong' . . . I think it's a cause of many disputes and wars and things, though it also gives some people spiritual progress, like they're more peaceful.*

In comparison:

*[RS: FG]*

*Jude: . . . Buddhism is such a . . .*

*David: Personal thing.*

*Jude: Not a religious religion at all.*

*INT: Isn't it a world religion?*

*Jude: Yeah, it is. But it's not like other religions. Like other religions have their churches, and their mosques or whatever, whereas Buddhism, yeah they've got temples, but it's not, you don't have to go there on a special day.*

Amongst the WF, whilst views on Christianity were fairly consistent with those expressed in other groups, some knowledge was voiced about other religious traditions: war in relation to Islam, whilst Buddhism and Hinduism were seen as very accommodating to people of other faiths:

*[WF: FG]*

*Peter: Hinduism and Buddhism are happy at other religions, and they still believe that people will go to their own whatever.*

Christian respondents tended to think of 'others' as religious rather than themselves,

*Marie [EC: FG]: I don't think I'm religious . . . Other people are, you know, other religions . . .*

The EC group in contrast to the preceding groups, did not immediately evoke representations of Christianity when asked about religion. Primarily, the term conjured images of other religions, such as Sikhism and Islam. Jehovah's Witnesses

were considered particularly restrictive because there is little room for contesting their beliefs and values:

[EC: FG]

*Jude: . . . Christianity's the most realistic faith there is because, it recognises that there are differences between people and that they have to be allowed to make up their own minds, rather than in other things, where you know, you're kind of told what to think in a way.*

In addition, 'other' religious people are unable to conceal their religious identity. Sikhs for example, wear religious signifiers, whereas Christians show no outward signs:

[EC: FG]

*Marie: . . . if I met folk that I didn't know, I don't think they would think I was religious because of the way I spoke or acted or what ever, but if you met somebody else . . . Sikhs . . . they wear their, stuff on their head and their clothes and everything.*

Their dialogue on 'other' religious signifiers imputes a desire to blend in with their peers on two levels: the physical and the mental. They do not want to be construed as different because they are Christians, in their style of dress or in their actions. Simon's claim of active participation in 'normal' teenage activities (one barometer seemed to be consumption of alcohol) confirms this. Most Christians however, claimed that they could easily recognise a fellow Christian, based upon intuition rather than tangible factors:

[EC: FG]

*Jill: . . . When you do meet other Christians, you can tell, totally, rather than they're like other people you meet . . . It breaks down a barrier, if you know they're a Christian but you don't know anything else about them, you find it easy to talk to*

*them . . . cause you know they're not judging you and you're not judging them at the same time.*

*Thomas: It means you don't have to be scared of embarrassing yourself if a conversation arises and you're talking about something [connected with Christianity] . . . : Which you might do if you're with strangers or whatever.*

*Jill: It also gives you something to talk about as well . . . cause church like, you can always say what you were doing last Sunday or something.*

This group do not consider themselves particularly religious, despite being regular church-goers. When asked about the thoughts evoked by religion, responses indicate differences between themselves and other religious people:

[EC: FG]

*Jill: I don't think like, our religion, I think more of like Hindus and Buddhists and stuff, instead of like Christians first of all.*

*Marie: Yeah, that's right, cause I don't think I'm RELIGIOUS, but I think people, other people are, you know, other religions, and I think like that*

*. . .*

*Simon: Their lives over rule it like, it rules over their lives you know, this is the main thing in their lives, this is their religion.*

Christianity is considered more personal than other religions, less rigid and infused with certainty:

[EC: FG]

*Thomas: It's just, it's a one to one thing and it's not like other religions where you have to do certain things in order for you to get where you go in that religion . . . Jehovah's Witnesses, they can do certain things but it's still only a chance that they'll go to their heaven. It's not definite, whereas in the Christian faith and you've committed yourself to God and . . .*

*Jill: Yeah, cause my friend . . . her parents are Muslim I think, but she doesn't keep to it so much cause she's like the second generation growing up in Britain and it's*

*not so strict for her, but I know when she goes back to Tunisia she has to cover herself up completely, and I think their religion is totally different because, it's not so, erm. I don't think it tells you what you should think. I think it tells you what you should do, not what kind of person you should be but what kinds of things you should be doing.*

In common with the other focus groups, being religious implied restrictions and codes of conduct. However, generally such restrictions were re-directed towards those of other religious faiths. Overall, they considered themselves spiritual, their contention being that people can be both religious and spiritual (discussed in Chapter 5).

Christians spoke of other Christians in positive terms. Not only did they claim to be capable of recognising others, but meeting and sharing forms of social communion enhanced their Christian identity. It was a relief to be in the company of like-minded people where a two way process of judgement was less likely to occur; a judgement based upon what was said and also through behaviour in a particular situation. In the company of non-Christians they expressed the constant fear of revealing their Christian identity through conversation which may ultimately lead to embarrassment. The Evangelicals presented an image of the Christian that does not correspond to the stereotype mentioned earlier. Talk was of contestability and guidelines, rather than fixed dogma, rules and codes. Terms used to describe themselves, particularly in relation to the spiritual called upon modern teenage language, emphasising the centrality and significance of individual interpretation. Their Christianity represents a combination of modern, individualistic ideas of the self with a traditional religion. The image of the stuffy church-going Christian has little fit with current teenage conventions. They have their own personally negotiated interpretations of Christianity, a religion that encourages free and independent thinking. Its meanings are fluid, multi-faceted and contestable.

Whilst their individual interpretations are important, the collective element inherent in the church is crucial in confirming their identity. Sharing time with others in the

faith is vital since Christian identity is disputed in other contexts, notably the school where friends press them on salvational issues, a fact confirmed in other focus groups.

By contrast, respondents in the MC thought primarily of Christianity in the images evoked by religion. Though they had firm ideas about what it meant to be spiritual, overall they considered themselves religious, a distinction that will be elaborated subsequently. Unlike the people in the non-Christian groups, Christianity provides direction and purpose to their lives, as do friends and family, though they have periods of indiscriminate despondency. Although the EC were reluctant to perceive of themselves as exclusively religious, both Christian groups present a clear notion of difference and superiority between Christianity and other religions:

*Catherine [MC: INT]: I'd rather see them believe my faith, but I wouldn't ever force it, or say that to them. I'd just let them carry on . . .*

Several functions of Christianity have been identified by non-Christians: as comforter, particularly in providing reassurance to children, and as a safety net – illustrated in comments from the WF:

[WF: FG]

*Pippa: Well, you get your morals hand fed you and you've got support.*

*Catherine: And you know what's gonna happen.*

*Pippa: It's like a safety net cause you think it's OK when I die I'll go to heaven so I can make a mess of my life, that's why most people start going to church when they're eighty.*

*Catherine: It's like when they're desperate they need something to cling to.*

*Michael: [with irony] I'm gonna croak so I better start believing, eh?*

*Pippa: Better start believing or I'll go to hell.*



Similarly, some participants in the RS group felt that the inculcation of a total religious worldview combats worries and life is generally easier. In the absence of a religious worldview,

*Sonia [Pilot:INT]: You've got to make every decision for yourself, you've not got anyone who's got a code of ethics laid out for you. You've got to come to terms with death in your own way.*

Respondents in the SS group conceded religion as a comforter for people generally:

*[SS: FG]*

*Paul: I think the basis of religion is to make people feel better.*

*Esther: Aha. It's nice for people.*

*Sophie: It's nice to have something to believe in.*

*Esther: Aha, and that they can get comforted by. I think that's what I think.*

*Kerry: There's someone like protecting you, if you do certain things then you'll be protected.*

*Sophie: Aha.*

*Kerry: When you die you will go to that wonderful place and everything will be brilliant.*

#### **4.12 Conclusion**

Overall, amongst the non-Christian groups, religion is considered as Christianity and substantively as belief in God and heaven. This is perceived negatively, based largely on experiences at schools, and to a lesser extent, church. None of the respondents in these groups view Christianity as important in their lives, or at least were unwilling to admit this within group confines. Similarly, Levitt concluded that Christianity “was not part of daily life or popular culture, its rituals were not built in to family life

and elements of practice were left behind with Primary School.” (1996:130). Religion in being primarily conflated with Christianity, was viewed overall as fundamentally rigid, authoritarian and largely prohibiting the free play of the self. The church – its primary mediator – is viewed similarly in sharp contrast to experiences relayed by the Christian groups.

Although not institutionally religious, non-Christian respondents exhibit a tangible level of interest in religion. The idea that religious beliefs ought to be private is consistent across the groups; even Christians are inclined towards this way of thinking. Furthermore, the capacity to make one’s own choices and not to have religion imposed was very strong.

The transition from Primary to Secondary school was the litmus test for those who had believed in the Christian teachings, rejecting and modifying their beliefs as they were increasingly exposed to other knowledge systems and less inclined to accept teachers and parents uncritically. Conversely, beliefs could become stronger. However, the extent to which this occurs is greatly influenced by parental religiosity, the family a crucial factor in whether church-going behaviour continues.

Images of religion at Secondary School were derogatory, with a clear expectation that Christianity would be outgrown. By contrast, the faith of most of the Christians intensified on the transition to Secondary School. However, some anxiety was expressed about friends discovering that they are Christians. This anxiety was discerned in the pilot group where one of the participants would not admit to being a church-goer. This was to prove an ongoing sensitive issue in subsequent groups, and it was only in convening both focus groups and individual interviews that this was revealed. This identity anxiety intensified in the RS group, where it emerged in the individual interviews rather than the focus group, that two were church-goers and one a Jehovah’s Witness. Various strategies for concealing their religious identity were adopted (discussed more fully subsequently). This anxiety augments the contention that Christianity and being religious are largely obscured within the school amongst peers. Indeed the school, particularly Secondary, is very much the

locus of learning *not* to be different, a category that includes being religious in the conventional sense. Fear of sanctions from peers are fairly persuasive limits upon expressing particular identity aspects.

Having been asked what they understood by the term religion, most responses from non-Christians reveal negative sentiments about Christianity. In turn this is presented as a lifestyle inhibitor with accompanying rules and restrictions. Labelling and stereotyping were common in so far as the religious person is consistently spoken of in terms suggesting 'the other'. Such boundaries present the religious person negatively; as constrained. The EC group engaged in drawing similar boundaries in demarcating the religious other, diverting the label from them-selves. Whilst their version of Christianity is fluid and contestable, the 'religious person' lives a life of routinisation. Their reluctance to identify with being religious strongly suggests that they are aware of the negative connotations the concept implies.

Christianity emerged overall as the delimited signification of religion, conveyed in negative language except amongst Christians. The non-Christian groups had varying levels of experience of Christianity, mediated largely through their Primary schools and church, thus calling into question the notion of the unchurched. Many children and young people continue to be exposed to its core elements despite living in non-Christian households. Core conceptual teachings included the idea of an anthropomorphic God, Jesus, and heaven and hell, which mediate not only the idea of punishment and rewards for behaviour, but also an afterlife. It may also be the case that these core concepts, with the ideas that they embody, have some rebound effect upon subsequent religiosity, discussed later in the theme of common religion (Chapter 6).

Identifying concise triggers of disbelief is problematic. The introduction to Secondary school constitutes a transitory period towards independence when young people begin to critique what is formerly taken-for-granted and are exposed to a wider range of knowledge systems and viewpoints, rudimentary science being a main contender for some. A minority finally rejected Christianity after a critical event

such as the death of a significant other and the apparent discord between suffering and an omnipotent God.

Elements of Christian exposure endured at Secondary school, primarily though not exclusively through assemblies. Respondents strongly indicated their hostility to these. Other sites were the R.M.E. class. Overall, R.M.E. was viewed quite favourably, and this was *because* there was little exploration of Christianity. Rather, this was the main site for learning about other religions.

The current church-goers envisaged a positive role for Christianity. By contrast, the non-Christian pilot group presented its consumption as bounded, limited to an explanatory device for bereaved children, hence it was accorded some functionality. Other non-Christian groups did not convey any positive role for Christianity, though conceded paradoxically that adherents had an easier life when they possessed a Christian worldview. All non-Christians appeared hostile to religion as Christianity for similar reasons. It interfered with their notions of individuality and creativity. Language used to express this, often cloaked in sarcasm, referred to it as restrictive and boring, with elderly congregations and irrelevant teachings. Some respondents encountered Christians at their doors and in urban spaces, resenting their intent, captured in phrases such as 'preaching at'.

Although there was considerable antipathy toward Christianity, several retained an interest, particularly in the salvational and eschatological dimensions. Most respondents spoke of Christian friends or family and some respondents specifically questioned them about their beliefs, in particular some members of the WF. Their degree of interest in Christianity is considerable, their level of contact with Christians of a similar age being consequential. This range of questioning was subsequently confirmed by the EC commenting that friends often enquire about similar issues.

In the lives of the regularly practising Christians, Christianity is very much in the foreground. In wider society this emphasis applies to a minority of the general population. For the majority of people and for non-Christian respondents in this

study, Christianity is something in the background. However, although much of the preceding data reveals a rejection of Christianity, when we look beyond institutional religion, a rather different pattern emerges.

## Chapter 5 Shifting Landscapes: Spirituality and Religiousness

### 5.1

In the preceding chapter antipathy towards religion was a substantial theme, considered in negative terms and synonymous with institutional religion.<sup>105</sup> Religiousness thus defined was not accorded any relevance to the personal lives of the non-church-goers.<sup>106</sup> By contrast, the introduction of a corresponding concept – spirituality – was considered to be very relevant. The term was not introduced by the researcher. Rather, it had been self-elected in the pilot group as something connected – yet distinct – from their understandings of religion.

The participants were particularly enthused and animated in discussing spirituality in contrast to the reserved attitudes and closed body language accompanying discussions of religion. However, although there was less reticence in discussing spirituality than there had been with religion, respondents appeared more at ease with the topic in individual interviews. The tenuous nature of religious plausibility structures across the focus groups rendered discussions about some features of the transcendent problematic, particularly with regard to an individual's presentation of self towards others. The concern with self image being particularly acute during the teenage years, the groups were happier to discuss such issues with an interested adult than in front of their peers.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> This association has been highlighted in research across other parts of Britain. See Collins, 1996, for example.

<sup>106</sup> This is confirmed in Francis' extensive research (see bibliography).

<sup>107</sup> See recent studies from MINTEL, (1995), HMSO, (1996) and Willis, (1993) for evidence and discussion of this concern. Also Meadmore and Symes on young people, clothes and the presentation of self (1997: 174). They highlight the importance of bodily appearance to young people.

## Spirituality and Religiousness

This section explores respondents' attempts at making sense of spirituality, including some biographical recollections defined as spiritual experiences. Principally, the theme of this chapter entails a deconstruction of spirituality: what it is, and the role it assumes in young people's lives.

During the first stage of research, questionnaires were administered to thirty-five respondents; one question asked 'would you describe yourself as a religious or spiritual person?' Responses from the questionnaire are presented below.

**Table 3      Self-Descriptors of Religiosity**

	Religious	Spiritual	Neither	Both R+S
RS and SS combined n= 16	1	6	8	1
Woodcraft Folk n= 6	0	2	4	0
Church-goers EC and MC n= 13	8	4	0	1
Total	9	12	12	2

### KEY

WF: Woodcraft Folk  
RS: Religious Studies Group  
SS: Science Studies Group  
EC: Evangelical Church Group  
MC: Mainstream Church Group



The church-going groups (EC and MC) have been collapsed into one category because they gave similar responses, though marginally more people had claimed to be spiritual in the EC (discussed in detail subsequently). In the SS and RS groups, the categories are also collapsed on the basis of similar responses with the exception of two people in the RS group claiming two further categories: religious, and religious and spiritual (both). The WF group were somewhat atypical because whilst two people claimed to be spiritual, the remainder of the group did not claim to be either religious or spiritual. However, given the small numbers of WF respondents their claims are not statistically significant.

Across the groups the pattern indicates that slightly more respondents claim to be spiritual than religious, with two respondents claiming to be both. The non-church-goers comprised the greatest majority of those claiming to be spiritual, whilst the inverse applied with claims to be religious amongst their church-going counterparts; thirteen claimed to be neither religious nor spiritual. In the individual interviews, however, some respondents who made this latter claim argued the contrary, inclining towards being spiritual. One reason might be that questionnaires are by nature limited in terms of the responses they elicit; interviews by contrast, allow respondents to explain and develop concepts and/or responses in depth.

## **5.2 Parental Religiosity**

Figures for respondents' parents reveal that eleven labelled their mother spiritual, seven as religious and five as both. Figures pertaining to fathers were not significantly different (taking into account that some respondents did not have contact with their father), the figures being seven, eight and three, respectively. Respondents claiming neither label similarly designated their parent(s) as neither. In contrast, those who claimed to be religious described one or both parents as religious. Hence, there was a significant correlation between descriptors of parental religiosity and themselves.

Whilst this does not necessarily illustrate instances of specific beliefs being culturally transmitted from parents to children, it indicates that a more general disposition towards being religious/spiritual and non-religious/non-spiritual is associated with parental outlook. Correspondingly, current church-going behaviour amongst respondents correlates with one or more family members (other than, and as well as the parent[s]) participating in the same behaviour.<sup>108</sup>

The questionnaires reveal a division amongst respondents based upon the self-descriptors 'religious' or 'spiritual'. Their responses were probed to gauge the nuances of both concepts. These are described in the following material, preceded by a discussion of current insights in the field.

### 5.3 What is Spirituality?

Recent studies emphasise the inconsistent and diverse usage of the terms religion and spirituality by both researchers and religious and spiritual believers alike (Zinnbauer *et al* 1997).<sup>109</sup> Despite the advance of research in this sphere there is still disagreement about meanings. Researchers generally attribute a bi-polar and eclectic range of explanations, for instance:

To some, religiousness meant church attendance, to others it meant acts of altruism, and to others it meant performing religious rituals . . . [and] references to spirituality have included elements such as interest in angels, New Age interest in crystals and psychic readings, and Evangelical or Pentecostal religious experiences (Zinnbauer, 1997: 550).

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<sup>108</sup> A substantial body of research supports this association of parental/familial links to children's religiosity.

<sup>109</sup> Their study selected eleven groups of people from Pennsylvania and Ohio. There were five different church groups; a New Age group, a group of community mental health workers, students at a conservative Christian liberal arts college; students at a state university; nursing home residents, and a nursing faculty. The age range was 15-85, with twice as many females of the 346 respondents completing questionnaires.

Zinnbauer's study provides a useful outline from which to consider the complex ways in which the terms have been applied, and works towards some delineation. The argument is a development of the work of Roof (1993) and Turner (1995), in which it is alleged that interest in spirituality increased in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Indeed, Roof maintains that there has been a *return* to spirituality; its diversity a reflection of consumer culture and a "rich and empowering melding of traditions and existential concerns" (1993:244). Correspondingly, whilst interest in spirituality has increased, public confidence in religion has declined, meaning that more discrete meanings have been attributed to spirituality. Zinnbauer develops this theme proposing that

[a]s spirituality has become differentiated from religiousness it has taken with it some of the elements formally included within religiousness. Therefore, recent definitions of religiousness have become more narrow and less inclusive (*ibid*, 551).

Spirituality by contrast, is a distinctly individual phenomenon associated with meaningfulness and personal transcendence. The individualistic emphasis assigns positive connotations to spirituality in contrast to religiousness. Some Christians challenge these pessimistic 'anti-religious' claims and express concern about the impact of contemporary spirituality. For example, a typical article in *Modern Theology* (Jones, 1997) draws attention to serious concerns about the turn to spirituality amongst some Christians, imputing no small measure of responsibility to extant literature available in book-shops.<sup>110</sup>

According to the author above, books about spirituality offer the reader "a journey without a *telos* except the ceaseless motion of self-discovery, or more likely, self invention . . . where the self is to be cultivated in its own individuality in everyday life"

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<sup>110</sup> Evidence from Bruce (1996) reveals the rise in such literature. Considering the amount of space provided for this literature, we can extrapolate some of the tension experienced within some quarters. Bruce explains, "[I]t is obvious to any browser in British book shops that far more space is devoted to 'Mind, Body and Spirit' than to Christianity . . . [Indeed]the trend is stronger than it appears. Many New Age titles will be classified as medicine, psychology or ecology, and many titles are not published in the UK but are imported from the USA, where the market and output are considerably larger" (1996: 199).

(1997:12). Contemporary spirituality is criticised on several points. Firstly, for its association with a consumerist mentality which posits a selection of undifferentiated religions. Bruce refers to this as 'pick'n'mix', explaining this eclecticism as "the characteristic form of religion in the late modern period . . . [that] represents in religious culture the dominant ethos of late capitalism: the world of options, lifestyles and preferences" (1996:233). Secondly, spirituality is denounced because individuality is celebrated to the detriment of community. Thirdly, spirituality is reproached for gnosticism; Jones alleges that this is a consequence of syncretic modern cultures. Finally, and perhaps most incriminating, contemporary non-Christian spirituality is seen as reprehensible for its reification of the private over the public, resulting in a bifurcation of spirituality and politics. This culminates in an inward journey that is ultimately negative since this leaves the *status quo* intact (Jones, 1997:17). From this perspective – unlike Christianity – contemporary spirituality is not considered an agent of change; it is entirely self-centred and reactionary. This criticism is addressed in the concluding chapter.

Positions such as those represented by Jones are in turn countered through British research into children's spirituality (Hay and Nye, 1998). Hay and Nye, for example, do not refer to the specific genre of spirituality condemned in *Modern Theology* (Jones, 1997); rather they attribute *possibilities* to modern 'privatised' transcendence (1998:114). The inherent idealism in Hay and Nye's account suggests that a holistic nurturing of spirituality might culminate in community (*gemeinschaft*), rather than its apparent antithesis (*gesellschaft*). For example, they critique current conformity to what they call 'false tribalisms'. These inhibit genuine sociality "based on a fear filled crushing out of individuality for the sake of tribal membership" (1998:191). On a similar theme, Roof predicts that whilst there will never be a wholesale return to religion in the traditional sense, smaller religious groups may emerge in the future. These may open new possibilities for communities (1997: pp. 250-256).

## 5.4 Definitional Distinctions

Zinnbauer's study identifies intra-group differences in levels of religiousness and spirituality. Overall, self-rated spirituality is significantly higher than self-rated religiousness, with the New Age group highest in the former and lowest in the latter. Over the entire sample the research shows significant differences in the content of the definitions of religiousness and spirituality, though

both definitions share some features in common, but they diverge in the focus of religiousness definitions on organisational or institutional beliefs and practices, and the focus of spirituality definitions on the personal qualities of connection or relationship with a higher power (Zinnbauer, 1997:557).

Broadly, the results of their study indicate three central themes. Firstly, many people perceive a difference between religiousness and spirituality – they have different correlates. For example, religiousness associated with higher levels of authoritarianism, religious orthodoxy, parental religious attendance and church attendance. Conversely, spirituality is associated with mystical experiences, higher income and New Age beliefs and practices. Moreover, spirituality is often described in experiential or personal terms, such as a relationship with a higher power.

Secondly, neither concept is fully independent. Most respondents considered themselves as both, and each suggested some association with frequency of prayer and church attendance.<sup>111</sup> Significantly, nineteen per cent of the sample claimed to be solely spiritual, and this group differed most from the majority; they were more likely to endorse a pejorative view of religiousness similar to Roof's (1993: pp. 79-83) "highly active seekers" of the baby boomer generation. Like Roof's 'seekers' they were

less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship such as church attendance and prayer, less likely to hold orthodox or traditional Christian beliefs, more

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<sup>111</sup> This is perhaps not surprising given the large number of Christian groups comprising the sample.

likely to be independent from others, more likely to engage in group experiences related to spiritual growth, more likely to be agnostic, more likely to characterise religiousness and spirituality as different and non overlapping concepts, more likely to hold non-traditional 'New Age' beliefs, and more likely to have had mystical experiences (Roof, 1993: 561).

Thirdly, intra-group differences transpired in self-rated religiousness and spirituality. It is not possible to assess the different meanings of the terms to the individuals concerned given the large-scale quantitative nature of their study. However, Hay and Nye's (1998) research also identified similar key differences in substantive perceptions of spirituality and religion. In distinction to religion they conclude that "[s]pirituality is almost always seen as much warmer, associated with love, inspiration, wholeness, depth, mystery and personal devotions like prayer and meditation" (Hay and Nye, 1998:6). Zinnbauer echoes these sentiments.

Zinnbauer does not present data distinguished by gender or age, preventing a closer comparison with the material in this thesis. Differences in terms of these variables may have indicated significant patterns within specific age cohorts, as well as by gender. Regardless of this omission, and despite the fact that Zinnbauer's research was located in America – where the religious landscape appears distinct from the British – the differences are more apparent than real. Though more people attend church in America, and politics and religion are more publicly symbiotic – for example, the 'New Christian Right' – church numbers are similarly in decline, hence Bruce concludes "[t]he USA is different . . . but it is not all that different" (Bruce, 1996: 131). This being the case, some meaningful comparisons with Zinnbauer's study need not be precluded, especially with the 19% who claimed to be solely spiritual.

In contrast to the research above, no clear relationship between those choosing the self-descriptor spiritual and those engaging in prayer emerged in this thesis: some of the self-rated spiritual respondents pray, but most do not. However, over half of all respondents pray, the majority being the self-rated religious. Two respondents who conceded neither



religious nor spiritual on the questionnaire admitted to praying prior to exams, one remarking *"Having said I'm not religious, I do pray sometimes, but it's not to God, it's just in general, I'm praying to whatever or whoever"*. Additionally, this thesis indicates a strong correlation between being religious and belief in God, and a weak association between the category spiritual and belief in God. Overall, less than half of all respondents *disbelieve* in God or are agnostic, a concept envisaged variously – primarily as creator – drawing upon traditional anthropomorphic Christian concepts like *"All powerful creator of the universe. Friend. Father"*. In comparison, interpretations of 'supernatural power' revealed less anthropomorphism, though some similarities to God were apparent.

## **5.5 The Super in the Natural**

Respondents were asked whether they 'believe in a power greater than humanity, for example, a supernatural power?' The responses indicate some relationship between assenting to this and claiming to be spiritual. Some caution is advised here though, since most claiming to be religious similarly subscribe to belief in a supernatural power. To the church-goers, the supernatural power (or power greater than humanity) represents the Christian God.

Clearer differences between the responses of the self-rated spiritual and self-rated religious emerge when the meaning of 'supernatural power' is unpacked further. For example, those claiming to be spiritual and believe in a power greater than humanity – a supernatural power – describe this with non-Christian imagery. The power is non-gender specific, rarely described relationally in personal terms, nor is it capable of intervening in people's daily lives; but it is the source of anomalous happenings – appearances of ghosts, and the power behind apparently psychic phenomena such as ouija boards. Most respondents who believe in such phenomena have their beliefs



sanctioned by television programmes such as '*Strange but True*' and speculate that future science will be capable of explaining supernatural phenomena:

*Christine [SS: INT]: You see all these films and hear all these stories, and then, you begin to question yourself. Science will explain it someday.*

*Michael [WF: INT]: It will be explained by science eventually / I've seen it on TV, the paranormal, psychic people, ghosts - there's definitely something going on.*

Science then, was *not* in all instances considered a de-legitimater of religiosity; rather it was seen as a potential explicator of paranormal phenomena. The media was frequently referred to as endorsing people's beliefs in a supernatural realm. For example, one survey conducted with a class of 11 - 12 year olds revealed that most claim to watch television for up to six hours each day, with the majority having access to their own set.<sup>112</sup> The second most popular type of programmes watched was of the science fiction genre, incorporating programmes such as *Fortean TV* and *Vorderman's Mysteries*. Evidence from *Social Trends* supports this viewing pattern, illustrating that television is the most common home based leisure activity for teenagers (1997:216). The programme most frequently mentioned amongst respondents, interpreted as factual and scientific, is *Strange but True*. Television is similarly implicated in igniting moral panics and conspiracy theories. Indeed, it is likely that it is not the quantity of television watched that affects such beliefs, rather the content of viewing is a more cogent factor influencing beliefs. This theme is re-visited in Chapter 6.

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<sup>112</sup> This was a class of Secondary school children from the same school as the SS and RS respondents.

## 5.6      Conspiratorial Angst

As well as maintaining belief in a supernatural power, many of the respondents evinced a fascination for conspiracy theories about people, powers and groups that have influence over everyday lives. Conspiracy theories are correspondingly evoked through the medium of the mass media, primarily television. Sean's description of a supernatural power has resonance here and contrasts sharply with most others across the groups:

*Sean [Pilot: INT]: 'THEY' created us. We're here to be guided by them . . . People here know more than they are going to let on, know a hell of a lot more . . . The American government for instance . . . There's a huge conspiracy theory . . . [the supernatural power can intervene] in any way it wants . . . It's just what they feel is best for us to do. How subtly they could create something like Aids, I'm not saying that they have, I'm just saying it's an option . . . I don't know why, but they're always going to hurt the innocent.*

Conspiracy theories such as those above have historical precedence, but seem especially widespread since the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma 1997. This incident marked a new *Age of Anxiety* according to Thompson (1997), spurring the growth of militia groups. Some of these are religious in orientation, but share an ideological distrust of government. Panic was also fuelled by the Waco incident in 1993. In this instance a religious group were almost entirely obliterated. These groups described by Thompson share a sense of time running out (End-Time), but he suggests further, they tend to reflect a quintessentially American mood of paranoia.

Thompson suggests several contributory factors to this American climate: the rise of the religious right, and the collapse of communism culminating in a national crisis of identity where "lacking the reassurance of a foreign demon, we search our own neighbourhoods for fiends of convincing malevolence and size" (*ibid*, 310). Other precipitating factors include the erosion of economic security, family breakdown and new technology. In lucid style and anxious prose, Thompson surmises that it is

difficult to gauge the “effect of the coming millennial anniversary on the national psyche and, especially, on End-time believers” (*ibid*, 315). Recent headlines have not however, reported extensive coverage of apocalyptic mayhem initiated by cult-like activists.<sup>113</sup> Contrary to Thompson’s concerns, pre-millennial angst proved to be over-rated, an exaggerated phenomenon ignited by a media spiral of anxiety.

The pilot group conveyed some signs of pre-millennial angst. This was mainly limited to two male respondents in relation to their conception of a supernatural power, very much in the genre of *X-Files* described typically by Sean above. Further, whilst everyone in the Science Studies group admitted to being ardent fans of this TV programme, more explicit talk about aliens suggested some sense of government conspiracy – though less urgent in tone (discussed in Chapter 6).

The following sections construct themes related to spirituality from all respondents. These are collapsed into three overlapping categories, conveying perceptions of spirituality in relation to religion: spirituality as less than religion, distinct from religion, and as something more than religion.

## 5.7 Spirituality as Less than Religion

A minority of respondents saw spirituality as almost a corruption of religion – as superstition. Fiona was unusual in the RS group in associating spirituality with superstition:

*Fiona [RS: INT]: . . . I’m quite superstitious sometimes. I do believe there’s ‘something else’, so maybe that’s my understanding of spiritual.*

*INT: Do you ever feel there’s ‘something else’?*

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<sup>113</sup> One tragic exception exposed by the media recently is the case of the Ugandan doomsday Cult. Over 1,000 are believed to have been killed by the group’s leaders when the world did not end as prophesised (see ‘Cult death toll rises after discovery of child corpses’ Lucy Hannan and Katherine Butler in *The Independent*, 30.03.2000).

*Fiona: Yes, for example, last night the sunset was really nice, and you just kind of think / / But if I was a religious person that would mean to me being part of a religion, but I'm not. But I'm not one of these people who doesn't think about anything. I do sometimes take a step back and think there must be something else, so I would say I was spiritual.*

*INT: Do you think you can be religious and spiritual?*

*Fiona: Yes, probably. I suppose if you're religious and you might have some kind of experience and that could be classed as spiritual as well, not just religious . . . if you have an out-of-body experience or something.*

*Religion doesn't really play a part in my life but I do think of religious questions, for example, is there a God? Even though I don't believe in one. I think that I am more of a spiritual person because I have some superstitious ideas and believe in the paranormal. I think there is definitely something else, but I don't use the term God. I see life as a maze; when you die is when you find the middle.*

Grant is atypical in the SS group, though similar to Fiona above in attributing the inclusion of superstition to the spiritual realm. Fiona referred to out-of-body experiences as spiritual, ostensibly attributing a New Age element to being spiritual, whilst Grant referred explicitly to the New Age and 'peculiar' spiritual people.<sup>114</sup>

Grant attends church occasionally, though does not assent to this on his questionnaire since he does not want to be considered Christian due to the accompanying negativity. Likewise, his church-going was not conveyed in the focus group. For him, spirituality is largely distinct from religion because there is no compulsion to believe in God and the institutional element is omitted:

*Grant [SS: INT]: I think there is a difference / Spiritual people JUST believe in ghosts and past lives and things like that. But religious is going up to heaven, being with God. Spiritual people don't think you have to believe in God to be spiritual. But you have to, to be religious . . . There are a lot of people who believe, and do*

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<sup>114</sup> This is a common criticism according to Heelas (1997).

*spiritual things . . . they don't realise they're doing it but they're doing it anyway. Just like saying 'touch wood' and things like that. That's a bit spiritual I think. Not walking under ladders . . . I do that myself sometimes . . . Spiritual people are weird, they believe in crystal balls, that kind of stuff, witches and wizards. And these wee stones you get for putting round your neck. A friend's got one of them . . . He calls it something, his birthstone. He's got it on a wee piece of string around his neck. I don't know why he wears it . . . I asked him what it was . . . His birthstone, I think that's a bit spiritual.*

Later in the interview he claimed belief in an ineffable 'something'. However, he seems to be moving toward Christianity. His father works for a local church (though Grant is unsure of his role there) remarking that he is not a 'real' church-goer, mechanistically adopting the motions without really believing (discussed further in Chapter 7).

Like Grant, Ross (MC) interprets being spiritual as inferior to being religious, describing himself as the latter:

*Ross [MC: INT]: I think spiritual is sort of almost going down the superstition kind of road. It's more spirits, not actually a God or whatever; it's all different kinds of things. And not an actual one thing. It's lots of different things. It's a hard question.*

Supernatural powers, he continued, emanate from God and are benevolent – miracles for example. Ultimately, Ross shared the view with a minority of respondents that being spiritual is something less than being religious, primarily since the former is associated with superstition. Other respondents saw the two as clearly distinct.

## 5.8 Spirituality as Distinct from Religiousness

Whilst the conjunction between superstition and spirituality led to the latter being seen as inferior to religion, other definitions were much more positive about spirituality. This section considers the differences between substantive definitions of spirituality and being religious, and shows some overlap with the final sub-category.

[RS: FG]

*Jude: I'd say a spiritual person sort of looks for answers whereas a non spiritual person would sort of accept things the way they are and just /*

*INT: So a spiritual person is searching for something?*

*Jude: Yeah.*

*INT Would you agree with that David?*

*David: Yeah, they're searching for something inside.*

*INT: Something inside?*

*David: Yeah, rather than . . .*

*Dan: Yeah, they're seeking answers by themselves rather than by religion.*

Whilst this idea of searching has parallels with the description of people engaged in New Age pursuits – such as Roof's 'highly active seekers' (1993) – particularly in the rejection of institutional religion and the idea of searching for 'something inside', consumerist and/or group involvement is absent amongst the young respondents. The spirituality they talk of is highly individualistic and far less structured than either institutional religion or a more consumerist orientated spirituality, discussed by Heelas (1996).<sup>115</sup>

From the perspective of the RS respondents it is possible to be religious and spiritual simultaneously, though spirituality is ultimately freer and contestable, a perception also held about Buddhism. Indeed, both Buddhism and being spiritual had little 'religious' flavour as they understood it:

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<sup>115</sup> See also Mears and Ellison (2000) for an American study researching the correlates of participation in New Age groups and activities. They found that people in their twenties, rather than boomers in their forties, were more likely to consume New Age products.

[RS: FG]

*David: I suppose you can question your spirituality, whereas if you belong to a faith or something, you cannae really question that faith . . . so spirituality's a bit more open and free to test . . .*

Articulating spirituality was difficult for all respondents, who generally defined it in relation to religion and religiousness – the latter involving church, worship, and God within the context of organisational structures. By contrast spirituality is ‘that extra something else’ as David had asserted. This involves asking similar existential and ontological questions to organised religions but providing different answers. Crucially, the distinguishing factor is the lack of institutional association. This is considered in positive terms.

*Michael [MC: INT]: Spiritual people seem to be a lot freer than religious people, they tend to do their own thing more than the religious sort. Being religious and spiritual, you can do both and many spiritual people do not believe in God, but I think they believe more in the power of the human mind.*

Two people in the WF group considered themselves spiritual, whilst the entire group perceived spirituality more positively than religion, emphasising its freedom and fluidity as well as attitudinal and behavioural dimensions. Only one respondent (Sarah) considered that a person might be both religious and spiritual.

Jane (RS), a lifelong church-goer, described herself as religious. From her perspective, spirituality involves asking similar questions about life and death as religiousness but arrives at different answers. Spiritual people do not necessarily believe in a God. ‘Religious people’, however, see a point to life:

*Jane [RS: INT]: I suppose you can be both, but you could be one or the other. If I was thinking of religious it would be someone who goes to church every week and is really into it. I suppose spiritual is more / / I don't know. Spiritual, you don't seem*



*to think of church and things. I suppose you can be spiritual and not go to church. Or you could be both.*

Jude (RS) by contrast preferred the self-descriptor, spiritual. Being religious is associated with worship at specific times at a specific locus, and belief in God. There is a very clear difference in her feelings about religiousness and being spiritual:

*Jude [RS: INT]: Religious / You go to your building whether it's a church, mosque, or whatever and you have a God usually and you worship him. Whereas if you're spiritual, you don't necessarily have to go to church and praise whoever. It's so difficult to try and put into words . . . Spiritual people, I don't think they tend to care as much what anyone else thinks of them, but they look out for other people more . . . I suppose religion helps you if there's death or anything. I suppose you think it's OK because he/she's up in heaven now / they're happy. And I suppose that makes it a bit easier to deal with . . . maybe if you're, like, spirituality helps you as well because you're not bothered about it. It may sound a bit selfish but you can deal with it better because that's how it is, and you can accept it easier.*

Spirituality then, is individualistic, lacking the communality of religion and more experientially focused than church-type religion, though both share the function of providing ultimate answers, such as those addressing death. Both types of religiosity help people to put their lives into perspective:

*Jude [RS: INT]: Religion doesn't really play a part in my life at all - it's not something that I really think about at all. Spirituality is a different matter. Sometimes I see myself as spiritual, sometimes I don't. It really depends on what your circumstances at the time are. If I'm feeling down about things that I can't talk to anyone else about, I sometimes think that just sitting trying to work it out by myself is the best way, and I consider that to be quite spiritual.*

Catherine (WF) explained her inclination toward being spiritual, but had not indicated this on the questionnaire until the final question asking respondents whether they would change their mind about describing themselves as religious or spiritual.

*Catherine [MC: INT]: I think religion is more structured and spiritualism is just more relaxed than religion. I think there's a whole lot of pressure to go to a church, to not sin, but spirituality is not being pressured and more relaxed. But I guess you can be religious and spiritual. But I think if you go to church every Sunday it's more structured, it's not really like spiritual . . . Now I think about it a bit more. I'm not sure why, I want to know what will happen when I die. I'm more aware of goings on. But when I was younger I just went to school and didn't think about it.*

The responses draw a distinction between the communitarian emphasis of religion compared to the more relaxed and individualistic basis of Christianity. The following material is a continuation of this section, but highlights clearer distinctions between perceptions of religion and spirituality. Comments on Buddhism are further explored, followed by a discussion of more specific behaviour and attitudes.

## **5.9 Buddhism and 'Other' Religions and Spirituality**

The preceding sub-section considered religion and spirituality as distinct entities. One reason for considering spirituality in more positive terms centers on its alleged inclusiveness – the idea that spirituality accommodates a wider range of beliefs, such as Buddhism. Within the confines of their understanding of religion as Christianity – authoritarian, rigid and prescriptive – it is clear why some might think contestation prohibited. However, thoughts on Buddhism reveal an overly simplistic view of its varied forms.

In Britain, Buddhism is packaged: enculturated and synchronised with particular western cultural values. This is generally characterised by a belief that Buddhists

need only meditate occasionally, make some attempt to control and structure thoughts, and believe in reincarnation.<sup>116</sup>

Madge (1965) conducted research into children and Christianity. Like other research mentioned, she conflates Christianity with religion. This is despite the fact that an interest in 'oriental' religions was highlighted by some of the children in her study. The children were informed that 'oriental' religions are 'heathen'. The proposed aim of the study was to encourage self-discovery in Religious Education, but attitudes of prohibitive cultural blindness, indeed racism, rather negate the intended aim. Such attitudes within the context of Religious Instruction have contributed towards the negative reputation of RME at school – hangovers from the recent past.

In relation to the above, a more recent work about how 'others' are represented, identifies the concept of 'orientalism' as a discourse of power (Said, 1995). Orientalism embraces and symbolises the idea of the positional superiority of European identity and connotes

the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth century and early-twentieth-century European colonialism . . . [O]rientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" (1995: 2).

Nevertheless, the concept remains common currency and is equally applicable today.<sup>117</sup> Interest in other religions generally, and Buddhism in particular, has increased.<sup>118</sup> An area in which this interest is evidenced is from pupils studying

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<sup>116</sup> Michael Carruthers in *Founders of Faith* (1989) suggests that Buddhism is an extremely portable religion because of its essential tolerance, addressing itself to universal human characteristics, such as suffering and the relational bonds between people (1989:77). Such features may account for its contemporary popularity.

<sup>117</sup> One typical example is a Nordic study which observes that favourable religious attitudes (by which the author also means Christianity) decreased with age whilst interest in other religions, notably "oriental" ones increased (Helve, 1991:386).

<sup>118</sup> Melton (1991) relates the presence of Hindu and Buddhist groups in the west (particularly from 1965 onwards), to trends in immigration. Opposition to non-Christian religions came mainly from conservative Christian bodies. Indeed "[t]he growth of alternative religions in the twentieth century generated a counter-movement headed by those who saw the establishment of alternative religious communities as a threat" (1991:466). Madge's (1965) refusal to allow children to discuss their interest in 'oriental' religions in the study referred to above, indicates the anxiety experienced by some Christian bodies regarding their dwindling numbers.

R.M.E. in Scottish schools, and their preference for other religions exceeding Christianity. One respondent exclaimed that her teacher had apologised before teaching them about Christianity, whilst referring to Buddhism as 'cool'. Simon (EC) said of his R.M.E. teacher:

*Simon [EC: INT]: . . . He had a funny view on Christianity. He'd go deep into Hinduism, Judaism, especially Buddhism. When it came to Christianity it was short and sweet. He believed that no one really wanted to know about Christianity and people are only interested in other [religions].*

The prominence formerly accorded to Christianity has been reversed in contemporary R.M.E., with Buddhism ascending and Christianity disparaged. This is paralleled by declining church numbers and the rise of contemporary spiritualities. Correspondingly, the preceding chapter has clearly shown that schools can make a difference to attitudes towards Christianity and religion generally.

Dan distinguished Buddhism as spiritual and appealing:

*Dan [RS: INT]: I liked all these different aspects on 'no self' and things like that, because if you really think about it, nothing's permanent . . . If you're religious, you follow a God and you basically just follow the religion. If you're spiritual / I mean you're more like sort of proving yourself. I mean like being a better person, calming your mind down . . . I'm kind of in between. I mean basically spiritual and religious, I dunnae really see it separate because if you're religious you can be spiritual as well, it's just basically the same thing for me.*

He remarked further that he was slightly religious and spiritual, but had neither indicated this on the questionnaire nor in the focus group. He claimed to be religious because he believed in the central tenets of Islam – Mohammed as the true prophet. Though being religious and being spiritual were not separate, he subsequently argued that spirituality is an outcome of being religious; being spiritual is about calming the

mind and self-improvement. Again, this illustrates a moral component to conceptions of spirituality, similarly highlighted by Sean.

Esther explained what she understood by the term spiritual. Her comments were introduced with an association of Buddhism and spirituality, explaining further that:

*Esther [SS: INT]: . . . What I mean by spiritual is having an open mind, thinking about things. I didn't want to put spiritual [on the questionnaire] in case people had different ideas of what that is. I would say I was maybe spiritual, not in the sense that I believe in religion, I don't think it's got a lot to do with religion anyway / more about the world and certain things . . . kind of to do with everything, the world, the universe. Religion is kind of the set thing, but when I think of spiritual I would think more of the world as well – 'what we are doing here? why we are here?' - that kind of thing . . . I guess, just growing up and thinking more about things, especially if someone dies in your family you kind of think more about it then. Where are they going? Those sorts of questions. As you get older you ask yourself more because you become more aware of everything . . . That [spirituality] kind of helps you to put things in perspective, if you're thinking, wait a minute, we're just a tiny place.*

In contrast to these positive images of Buddhism, Martha (MC) claimed that during a school visit to a Buddhist monastery she had sensed evil, a force in keeping with the Christian worldview. Her parents had not wanted her to visit because they strongly opposed other religions:

*Martha [MC: INT]: BECAUSE it's such a different thing that we believe in. They believe in things like reincarnation. Some of the things I found out are good, they do help people, try to counsel people and take them out. But what they do in the ceremony, I felt it was evil. They were swinging [things] in front of this gold, big Buddha thing, and I was thinking, this is SO evil / I put my hands over my ears, because they were going and speaking . . . I think the others [religions] are wrong.*

Buddhism then, was generally seen in positive terms that are fairly synonymous with perceptions of spirituality, though Martha was vehemently opposed to this. The data below explores attitudes associated with being spiritual. Respondents were asked for their thoughts on several issues, including the environment, helping others, abortion, and drugs. These corresponding attitudes highlight further distinctions between being religious and spiritual.

## 5.10 Spiritual Attitudes

### Environmentalism

A further issue associated with spirituality distinguishing it from religion, is an attitudinal dimension where the spiritual individual exhibits great concern for the environment and others. In the WF, for example, one of the central values encouraged in the WF is environmentalism; some spiritual people they argue, engage in positive social action aimed at change. Their behaviour is based upon attitudes held. For example, spiritual people

[WF: FG]

*Michael: . . . go on camps and road protest sort of things. They seem to care a lot more about environmental issues and Christians are more concerned, well not really Christians, but all the people in the churches are more concerned about social issues and stuff like that.*

*Pippa: Stuff that doesn't really matter.*

*Michael: It's to do with the good of the people.*

*Catherine: Of the planet.*

*Michael: Yeah, they think about the future a lot more I think. They're not following such a fixed code as other religious groups.*

The spiritual attitude incorporates major concern for the environment, with two thirds of all respondents claiming interest in environmental issues:

[RS: Self-defined S+R]

*David: It's our duty to look after it.*

[EC: Self-defined spiritual]

*Thomas: I tend to be a bit of an environmentalist . . . This planet seems to be going down the drain and that's ever increasingly a worry, with the introduction of nuclear power . . . We recycle paper and sometimes cans if we can be bothered . . . At the shop where my dad works there's a phenomenal amount of stuff that's chucked out, they've got a skip that's emptied every day sort of thing, and I think about things that could go to other people and yet they're just chucked out.*

Jude, despite claiming to be spiritual and helping others, like some of the above who made this claim, felt somewhat alienated from nature due to its apparently unregulated 'naturalness'. Her concern for the environment was perhaps correspondingly less urgent:

[RS: Self-defined spiritual]

*Jude: Litter, chopping down trees, digging up fields to make houses. Most of the time it's not treated very well . . . It looks nice in photos but not nice to be in. It can be nice walking through a forest, but there's too many beasties.*

Kerry who was neither religious nor spiritual surmised,

[SS: INT]

*Kerry: I think people should take more care of nature. I know a lot of people don't think it's important. Whether you're religious or not you should still care about the environment and how people treat it. I think it's important that people look after the world, because going by what scientists say, it might not last very long. Global warming and all that sort of thing.*



During the focus group, the WF seemed particularly enamoured with people who protect the environment, identifying them as spiritual people and elaborating in subsequent interviews:

*Pippa [WF: INT]: Nature is, you don't really feel nature. Nature is in the countryside, trees and animals and stuff. . . We are destroying our earth because of the amount of people here, and we are doing things towards it. I don't think if we started over again I don't think we could really avoid it. There's a few things we could have done, but mostly destroying our earth has been through ignorance I think.*

*Michael [WF: INT]: Nature is everything that hasn't been human built, I suppose. Anything natural, whether it's land or sea, or in the clouds. . . I think there's far too much destruction of it. Cutting down the forests, I don't think you should do that. If you destroy our environment, eventually I think it will come to the point where everything is destroyed. At the moment it's just being wrecked.*

Peter discussed the spirituality of the WF through getting 'back to nature', though in the focus group the general opinion had been contrary to this. It is likely, however, that this is a latent function of the camping activity at least. It incorporates digging holes for toilets, swimming and washing in burns, and sharing tasks such as cooking, washing up, tending the fire and treks through woodland. They are taught basic skills of how to survive and entertain themselves in natural surroundings. Peter said more about WF history, in accordance with some of the older literature accessed about the organisation.<sup>119</sup>

*Peter [WF: INT]: Getting back to nature . . . that's about all Woodcraft is spiritually, except for our roots in native American culture. The fact that Woodcraft used to be, people used to have names like Running Hare and things, kind of based on North American culture . . . I mean we're not spiritual completely.*

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<sup>119</sup> The literature search produced scant material, primarily about male-only organisations bearing a resemblance to today's men's movements in the US, through which they reclaim nature and their 'selves'. It seems that the origins concern getting back to nature and re-appropriating apparent lost skills and ways of being. There also appeared to be a tenuous link to Christian organisations such as the boy-scout movement.

The questionnaire had included the question, 'is there anything in your experience which arouses in you a sense of mystery and wonder?' Most respondents answered this. Across all groups answers relating to aspects of nature were most prolific, in particular pondering the size of the universe. Ultimate questions similarly aroused a sense of mystery and awe. These included such questions as whether a soul exists, notions of eternity, the origin of life, the meaning of life, and life's complexities and alternations. These questions were often triggered by an experience of nature:

*Pippa [WF]: Being alone outside at night, you're sometimes scared of something but you don't know what.*

*Owen [WF]: Watching the stars at night causes me to wonder what is going on at that precise moment in the universe.*

*Lynsey [RS]: Waking up and seeing the morning, and being able to see hills . . .*

Listening to music was another broad response:

*Michael[WF]: Music makes me think about life as a whole and how complex it is.*

Amongst most respondents spirituality involves an attitude of concern for others, and also suggests a feeling of wonderment and awe at life generally. Despite some intra-group differences, spirituality incorporates several primary facets for the WF group. Being religious and being spiritual exhibit some overlap in the search for answers to similar questions. Spirituality differs in being non-theistic, though this is a matter of preference. Additionally, affiliation to an institution is not mandatory, one corollary being that the 'search' can be self-directed. Spirituality legitimates contestability in distinction to following a religion; hence the self is accorded centrality and prominence in contrast to the determined self of religion.

Spiritual people possess an autonomous morality – apparently creatively constructed by them in contrast to prescriptive Christianity – based upon the ‘good of the people’ and ‘the planet’. Spiritual people can also be distinguished from the religious by lack of formal collective ties in contrast to a church, and through their accommodation of people from other faiths, or no faith. According to the WF group, the collective element of the church draws sharp boundaries emphasising difference. There is some collective sense alluded to in that eco-protestors mobilise collectively (albeit temporarily in most cases), but this is presented in more inclusive terms.

Michael and Pippa dismissed both religion and spirituality, though both were interested in discussing these subjects with others. Both perceived spirituality as a theoretical concept – fluid and facilitating a stronger sense of agency than religion:

*Pippa [WF: INT]: Being religious is believing in a set thing, and being spiritual is believing in the wonders of the world and different things, like it maybe nature's great and there must be something to it. And things like that. Whereas religion is kind of spoon-fed morals and things . . . They are probably more worked out, the spiritual. They're probably a bit more flexible, more in tune with the actual situation than a religious person can be. Because they're out of a book which was written, not in their time.*

Descriptions of spirituality outlined particular details about attitudinal and behavioural dimensions. The attitudes associated with spirituality were self-autonomy and open-mindedness, developing a questioning stance with progression through Secondary school. The maxim of independent thinking that occurs in tandem with incremental independence from parents is valued considerably. As the individual's social horizon expands, increasing awareness of the world and the universe is effected and translated into changed attitudes. The spiritual attitude as a corollary of this, invokes concern for others as well as for the environment generally. The behavioural dimension is informed by these attitudes and involves a relationship between the natural and social world, and social relations. Examples involve actions such as protesting against environmental damage, recycling and acting in accord with

nature, or participating in voluntary work helping others in need. Whilst many saw spirituality as enhanced closeness with God, being spiritual to many of the church-goers also incorporates the above elements.

The majority of respondents across the groups (the church-goers to a lesser extent), do not agree that religious people (largely translated as Christians), help others any more than non-religious people. Indeed, some respondents, like Dan, viewed most 'religious people' as self-serving and hypocritical, considering any religion that lacks spirituality as dogmatic, devoid of any exploratory motivation. Attention was drawn to people preaching modes of action with which they do not comply themselves. Such complicity was noted by Martha (MC) who described these transgressors as 'up themselves'.

Jude (RS) alleged that religious people really do not have such a caring attitude as people might expect; that they perform 'good actions' merely to serve their God. In this sense they participate in 'point scoring' and are selfish rather than self-less:

*Jude [RS: INT]: You see these people setting up soup kitchens for the homeless and they pretend to be Christians. But they're not doing it for homeless people, they're doing it for themselves as well . . . so God's going to be happy with them . . . If you're walking down the street, out of all the people who give to homeless people, no more than 50% will be Christians . . . they only do it because it's the done thing.*

Samantha (EC) similarly talked about her non-religious friends who performed voluntary work, challenging the myth that religious people are more caring and helpful.

Contemporary evidence however, contests the above claims, notably Gill's claim about the notion of Christians as 'moral communities' (1992). Gill argues that church-attendees are more practically involved citizens in the community, and that Christianity encourages individuals to limit self-interest. Furthermore, there is a **distinct Christian moral community. His argument is based upon USA trends and the**

*European Values Survey* which illustrate that amongst those involved in voluntary work (adults only), a highly significant proportion are church-attending Christians (Gill, 1992:19).

Amongst respondents completing the questionnaire for this thesis (n=46), twenty-eight claimed an interest in human rights. Approximately half of the respondents in both church groups did not assent to interest in this area. Of the forty-six, one quarter engage in voluntary work and seven did previously. Amongst those subsequently interviewed, two perform voluntary work from each of the MC, RS and WF groups, with three each in the SS and the EC. Of these thirteen, ten are female – gender being a more significant variable than the Christian/non-Christian, spiritual/non-spiritual dichotomy – and correlates with Gilligan’s female ethic of care (1982). Indeed, the type of voluntary work engaged in relates overwhelmingly to either caring for children with special needs, or helping the elderly – the foundation of traditional socially constructed female roles. This voluntary work however, did not take place in the public sphere. Rather, the care occurred in private and overwhelmingly in domestic settings. It is not clear to what extent this conflicts with Gill’s ‘moral communities’ thesis, since it may turn out to be the case that it is primarily *female* church-attendees that engage in more voluntary work. This thesis however, suggests that gender is the most significant variable here. By contrast, attitudes towards ethical issues such as abortion did not reveal gender differences. The gender differences that were most apparent throughout this study resided in whether or not respondents engaged in voluntary work.

Attitudes towards abortion varied across both group and gender. This is an issue that does exhibit some correlation with religiosity. The minority view was that abortion is always wrong; this includes three Christians and David (Jehovah Witness). Thereafter, the attitude is split between context; that is, whether the baby might be handicapped and whether the mother had been raped, as justifiable grounds. A similar number advocate pro-choice, claiming that it is the concern *only* of the mother; she ought to have the choice regardless of circumstances. All of the WF opted for this stance:

*Pippa [WF: INT]: . . . there's no point bringing an unwanted baby into the world, and it's still a foetus and it's not really alive. I think it's okay if you see it as the right thing to do.*

*Michael [MC: INT]: Basically I think that you should have a choice whether to have it aborted or not, it wouldn't be fair if you couldn't take care of the child, then it would be probably worse off to have it. It's up to the individual.*

The most prevalent attitude amongst church-goers collectively was of situational ethics, though this presents a difficult dilemma since abortion often, though not always, conflicts with church teachings. Gilligan (1982) found in her own study involving female college students and abortion, that women found this a difficult choice because they are accustomed to putting the interests of others' first. Perhaps this was less apparent with the younger respondents herein since it was not at all apparent that any of the female respondents had found themselves in a position where they were obliged to personally consider the moral implications of abortion.

Attitudes towards drugs were almost without exception disapproving amongst all respondents. Five claimed to have tried cannabis, three of which were in the EC. Indeed, the most liberal attitudes in this area came from Samantha and Simon in the EC group. They were equally as liberal in attitudes to abortion and cohabitation.

*Samantha [EC: INT]: I've tried things like hash and stuff but I'd never take any 'E' or any strong drugs, but if people want to take them, they can as long as they take them properly, and don't OD or whatever.*

Owing to these attitudes Samantha claimed to lack morality. Simon proved even more liberal in his attitudes to all of the themes discussed above. Where Thomas in the EC represented himself as a solidly committed Christian, Simon was significantly different in both attitudes and behaviour. These respondents are contrasted further in the chapter exploring identity (Chapter 7).



Francis and Kay (1996) claim that

declining religiosity is promoting a decline in empathetic capability. Such findings suggest that the drift from the churches may well be accompanied by lower levels of empathy among young people and by a hardening attitude towards others (1996:156).

Further “the drift from the churches may well be accompanied by lower levels of self esteem among young people and by a continued rise in anti social and self harming behaviours” (1996:157). There is little evidence to substantiate these accusations from the respondents in this study, whether spiritual, religious or neither. Simon proved an exception despite having been a life-long church-goer.

Simon engages in anti-social behaviour (by his own admission). Church-going then, does not necessarily mean that the individual will possess the attributes favoured by the church or such authors as Kay and Francis above.

Simon was asked about his attitudes towards drugs and abortion. His responses indicate very liberal attitudes contrary to the persona he presented in the focus group.

*Simon [EC: INT]: [On drugs] Good / bad. Jellies, Cocaine. . . I don't think they should be illegal . . . cannabis can help medically, and it's not a harmful drug. Cannabis doesn't kill anyone . . . [I've tried] cannabis . . . I've tried speed . . .*

*I like to watch violent films. I'm a stand up for my rights kind of guy. Yes, there's a couple of folk I'd really like to kick the crap out of.*

*INT: Do you ever find yourself in a moral dilemma with your friends?*

*I've never really had THAT thought / Probably it's ME who thought the thing up!*

Those identifying themselves as non-spiritual and non-religious turned out to be equally as inclined towards espousing some responsibility towards helping others, to perhaps do voluntary work, and oscillated between liberal and conservative attitudes on the issues discussed. Like those claiming to be spiritual, they pondered the



mysteries of life. Those claiming to be both religious and spiritual, that is, David (RS) and Thomas (EC), held the most conservative attitudes in relation to their personal lives, were inclined towards full societal redistribution of resources in their discussions on poverty. The main distinction between being religious and spiritual centres upon an institutional association and belief in God, rather than the specific attitudes held and behaviours engaged in. Exceptions were fixed views on abortion and cohabitation, which correlate most strongly with being institutionally religious. Conversely, those who claimed neither label shared a similar moral outlook to everyone else on most of the issues discussed.

In the focus group, initially confused understandings of spiritual were honed down to a single stereotype: the laid back hippie, product of the 1960's counter culture, designated self-reflective and near to nature. There was a clear association between being spiritual and having fun, exuding an aura of happiness. This stands in significant contrast to their perceptions of religious people, where issues discussed gravitated toward the themes of church experience, rituals, beliefs, particularly salvation, and concomitant morality. In particular they disliked the sensation of condemnation from some Christians, and objected to their allegedly superior morality on the grounds that this is prescribed rather than self-experiential.

### **5.11 Pick'n'mix Spirituality**

This sub-section highlights further details about the content of spirituality in a modern context. The eclecticism is characteristically pick'n'mix. Peter's (WF) version of spirituality is particularly self-defined and fluid, though the emphasis on self is not directed towards achieving self-potentialities like some of the New Age perspectives. He also describes his mother as spiritual and as sharing similar beliefs (father absent). His interpretation distinguishes spirituality quite sharply from religion – a way of contemplating life that has become more pronounced with age and exposure to other beliefs. Central to his beliefs are reincarnation and belief in a supernatural power:

*Peter[INT]: I see them as meaning separate things. Religious meaning that you believe in God, heaven and so on . . . but spirituality is something that is very much more being yourself, thinking about what you do, thinking about your own spirit and working with your own spirit . . . I mean I don't think that you just have a brain and it functions because that would make you a robot, you've got to have something else in here [gestures towards heart] that kind of works with your memories and your experiences and forms a personality and forms a spirit . . . I believe in reincarnation now and things . . . I'm sure that there is some kind of force made up of maybe lots of spirits that believe that they were God. . . [it was] the introduction of kind of reading what people believed in, reincarnation kind of made me think well may be that's possible . . . probably in about Secondary, the start of Secondary I would have thought . . . Also the meditation helped me to get back to what I believed in and what I thought before it had been influenced by others, like my family who doesn't believe in God really, so I was influenced by them but now I've got MY OWN belief system. I believe what I want to believe now . . . [being spiritual] helps me to make sense of death at the moment. It's made me fear death a lot less because I used to worry about it CONSTANTLY but now I don't really feel that it's a big problem. If I, whatever happens to me I'm fine with it you know?*

Professing belief in the supernatural he referred to an affirming experience:

*Peter: I saw a ghost . . . as clear as day . . . I didn't expect to see anything but I definitely did see something . . . It has concentrated my belief.*

Most respondents envisaged and described religion and spirituality as discreet categories, presenting the latter in largely positive terms. The majority of church-attendees however, considered spirituality as something exceeding the religious in a positive and profound way.

## 5.12 Spirituality as Something More than Religiousness

Most church-attenders typically conceived of spirituality as a step beyond being religious. That is, the depth of feeling and commitment becomes greater than previously. This occurs when the teachings and beliefs they have been raised with are finally internalised and acted upon. In addition, some respondents perceived spirituality as more explicitly experiential.

[EC: FG]

*Simon: When I first went to church, I wasnae spiritual at all, I was just, I suppose I'd put myself down as religious. I only went cause my mum dragged me along, but I'm glad I went now [group laughter], but it's over years you tend to like, open your eyes a bit and realise about things, so I think that's when you become spiritual. It's when you start believing and not just going cause you think it's right and you think like, everybody goes in my family, I'd better go, you know, and you sit there like, not thinking about it but just going.*

Simon spontaneously introduced the term spiritual into the group discussion, seized upon as a self-descriptor in preference to religious.

[EC: FG]

*Marie: I think spiritual's a better word because like, it seems to be a lot closer to God thing rather than religious, and it's a deeper thing as well, and an inner thing . .*

This view stands in contrast to most other respondents across the groups who claimed that individuals do not have to be religious to be spiritual. Being spiritual, to those belonging to the EC, is expressed as something more profound and positive than being religious. It is not clear at which point the transition might occur, though significant factors are participation in Bible camp and going to Secondary school, events sharing temporality.

Being spiritual from their perspective involves a relationship between self, Christianity and God. Imbibing Christian beliefs is an ongoing process, and is echoed in *acting upon* their beliefs, one corollary being enhanced closeness with God. David claimed to be more spiritual now than he had been at Primary School. Being religious marked a trajectory to becoming spiritual:

*David [MC: INT]: There's a lot of religious people that / they can quote and they can say things, [like] 'you shouldn't do that', but you know they're going away and doing that themselves so they cannae be truly spiritual . . . [spiritual people] might believe in a God and all that without being sort of a religious person and without going to church. I mean you can believe in God without going to church but in that way, once again asking questions about life and thinking about it, I think that's spiritual in a way . . . and gives a purpose and some sort of ultimate purpose . . .*

For Steve (MC) there is a clear distinction between being religious and spiritual.

*Steve [MC: INT]: I think religious is when you follow the beliefs set out in the religion, and spiritual is when you have an intimate relationship with God. So . . . they easily can be both but it just depends on the individual's experiences.*

Details from each of the Christian respondents told a similar story of having been taken to church from an early age. In the focus group discussion, it was clear that being religious was something prior to becoming spiritual, the former characterised by a considerable degree of routinisation: they went to church without really questioning, and primarily because their family attended.

To the EC group, being spiritual implies the inculcation of previous routinisation. However, being spiritual exceeds this since the individual is obliged to act in a manner which actualises the internalisations – hence the attitudinal and behavioural dimensions explored earlier. Both Samantha and Simon do not identify with being spiritual and appear to be the least committed Christians in this group, both having grappled with identity problems amidst non-Christian friends: Samantha claimed that

she would probably leave the church soon, and that she was "only Christian on Sundays", whilst Simon engaged in a number of controversial activities, such as under-aged sex, vandalism, drug taking and gang fights.

By contrast, Thomas explained,

*Thomas [EC: INT]: Because God is the centre to what I hold myself to, my spirituality with Him is everything. Religion is a result of that relationship. I can't have spirituality without God. But at the same time I can't really claim to have God without spirituality, that is, unless I'm just religious.*

Interestingly, some of the values of spirituality highlighted amongst the EC group were similar to the preceding groups. For instance, the importance of individuality and freedom from rules and constraints. The central difference between the two church groups is that the MC did not talk of freedom from rules and constraints in their version of Christianity. Both groups consider that spirituality is deeper than being religious. Despite some differences in interpretation, this is considered positively overall.<sup>120</sup>

Generally, the MC group, despite variations in their delineation of spirituality, were content to consider themselves as primarily religious, in contrast to the EC group. Across the groups, most participants identified both a behavioural and attitudinal dimension to spirituality. In addition, the PRS and the RS groups conveyed spirituality as locating the self at the centre. Spirituality involves the conviction or yearning for 'Something Other' in which the self is accorded considerable autonomy, particularly when compared to conceptions of religion. The data below continues this section, exploring alleged spiritual experiences in depth.

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<sup>120</sup> Some differences in details of interpretation are to be expected amongst Christians, and especially from David, a practising Jehovah's Witness. Studies by Zinnbauer (1997), and Hay and Nye (1998) confirm findings of difference. Indeed, their research indicates that not only do non-church-goers vary in their definitions of spirituality, but also similar contrasts emerge amongst committed Christians and between clergy. Some of these differences have emerged in the preceding data.

### 5.13 Spiritual Experiences

Hay's (1987) study of spiritual experiences indicates that two thirds of a large English sample were aware of a 'spiritual dimension'. Congruously respondents in this study were asked, 'have you ever had what you would describe as a spiritual experience?' and, 'is there anything in your experience which arouses in you a sense of mystery and wonder?'<sup>121</sup> From the questionnaire responses, including the pilot (n=45), under one quarter claimed to have had a spiritual experience, and a further nine were unsure. Cumulatively, this figure is nearly half of the sample, though there was no clear sense of gender bias here. In addition, those reporting having experienced a sense of mystery and wonder amounted to over half of the sample. However, there are grounds for caution in interpreting all of the responses here as religious or spiritual. Geertz (1996) raises a cautionary point:

For what else do we mean by saying that a particular mood of awe is religious and not secular except that it springs from entertaining a conception of all-pervading vitality like *mana* and not from a visit to the Grand Canyon? . . . A man can indeed be said to be 'religious' about golf, but not merely if he pursues it with passion and plays it on Sundays: he must also see it as symbolic of some transcendent truths (1996:70).

This is an important and worthwhile distinction to make, avoiding the pitfalls of defining all things as religious (discussed at the beginning of this thesis).

Across the groups, those who claimed to be spiritual were more likely to claim either a positive or an uncertain response to having had a spiritual experience, particularly amongst the SS and RS groups. This suggests an experiential angle to modern spirituality, as Zinnbauer demonstrates (1997). There were no clear gender differences between male and female claims of spiritual experiences, contrary to

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<sup>121</sup> A methodological problem in exploring religious/spiritual experiences concerns the wording of questions administered and their level of interpretation. For further discussion in this area see Hay, (1982: 113); Stark and Bainbridge, (1985:86), and Hornsby-Smith, (1998:417). The term 'spiritual experience' was selected in preference to religious experience as an outcome of the pilot study. Respondents suggested that the term spiritual was less alienating, and some argued that religious experience could be interpreted as having attended a church, rather than a transcendent experience. The question about experiencing a sense of mystery and wonder was also intended to tap into similar experiences, and based upon the wording used by Hardy (1976).



Hay's assertion that females tend to report such experiences more frequently, though he also adds that such reports tend to come from older people (1978). Feltey and Poloma (1991) also contend that women are more likely to have had religious experiences than men are.<sup>122</sup>

Thomas claimed to have had spiritual experiences.<sup>123</sup> This is entirely in keeping with his Christian worldview interpolating a world inhabited with angels and the devil. Spiritual experiences are something that he almost takes for granted within his worldview, unlike some other respondents:

*Thomas [EC: INT]: . . . there's been a number of occasions where I've sort of directly said 'get away!' to the devil and there has been that sort of feeling of relief the same time, because I've prayed 'look get behind me!' . . . You get the feeling that . . . the devil must have been close and that feeling that he must have been close means that he had some sort of control over me, and that's not nice, because he is all evil and all he wants to do is wreck.*

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<sup>122</sup> Evidence from *Social Trends* shows that 60% of British people most active in their religion are women (1997:224), though it is not known if higher levels of participation relates to higher levels of experience. This gender distinction is also highlighted in *Children in the Way* (1988) confirming that women are more likely to be involved in church activities, especially where children's clubs are available. Caution is required in the interpretation of these claims too; women are more active in the church, but *only* in specific areas. In positions of power making and executive decisions, women are vastly under-represented. Moreover, these studies do not reveal either the nuances involved in the interpretation of concepts like, 'more actively involved', nor do they probe the taken-for-granted meanings of terms such as religious or spiritual experiences. What the evidence does illustrate though, is that in terms of religiosity, specifically spiritual and religious experiences, women *report* these more than men do.

<sup>123</sup> Hornsby-Smith (1998) suggests a sense in which religious experience may be learned, a view close to Otto's discussion of numinous experiences incorporated within a framework of notions and doctrines of particular religions (1932). Byrne argues similarly that

[t]hese connections entail that such beliefs and experiences are parts of a publicly shareable and shared human institution. Experiences of the sacred may in a manner be private and unique but they are bound up with dimensions of belief, behaviour, experience and social organisation that define a human cultural phenomenon (1991: 24).

Thomas' assertion that 'other people were helping to produce' his experience of God's presence certainly supports this notion. Participation in organised religion necessitates being in some sense subject to others' teaching and experience. However, in instances of experiences reported by the non-institutional/spiritual or non-spiritual individual, it would be difficult to measure the extent to which a spiritual experience might be learned; especially in diffuse cultural contexts that lack audible religious plausibility structures to sustain the learning.



On the questionnaire Rachael (MC) said that she was uncertain whether she had had a spiritual experience. Pressed on this in the interview she presented this as something quite ordinary and taken-for-granted in a similar way to Thomas above:

*Rachael [MC: INT]: Well some people would think of seeing an angel or big lightning bolts or something, but I've never had that. I have prayed before which I suppose you could classify as a spiritual experience, I think, but other people might not . . . It feels pretty normal cos I do it all the time . . . Sometimes it's more serious, like, if you were having a serious conversation with a person, you'd notice it rather than just chattering, it would pass and you wouldn't think about it / You can have both of them . . . You sometimes get an uplifting feeling [in church] peaceful and just, you feel content really.*

Steve does not refer to himself as spiritual but provides a lucid and more out of the ordinary conception. His mother would speak 'in tongues' in his presence:

*Steve [MC: INT]: I know my mum has had spiritual experiences . . . She's just felt the presence of God really heavily in the room and she's spoke in tongues . . . at home during prayers . . . It's kind of strange when you are very young when your mum is praying with you then she comes out talking strange stuff . . . [I asked] her about it afterwards and she said she can't explain it, it just happened . . . I was like, it's weird what she's doing . . . It happened a few times when I was really, I don't know, it must have been when she was tucking me into bed when I was about six, five / to about ten, and she was praying with me afterwards and then she would talk in tongues . . . just sort of burst in to it . . . Just experiencing somebody else's [experience], they know that God is there and real, I think that made me sure that there was a God . . . She said she didn't know why it happens, 'we'll only know when we go to heaven and it just happens because God's there and He knows each one of us' . . . She probably still does it sometimes at night, but I don't see her doing it.*

The church in question is by no means charismatic or spontaneous in its style of worship, so it seems surprising that Steve has encountered such experiences through his mother and that they appear to find these quite natural. The worship in this church is highly formal, solemn and ritualised.<sup>124</sup>

Tom (SS), a non-church-goer, reflected upon spiritual experiences during the privacy of an individual interview. Though Tom's account is not typical in terms of details amongst respondents here, the 'guiding voice' is categorised as a religious or spiritual experience according to Hardy (1979: 40).

*Tom [SS: INT]: There's something there but it's not the typical God . . . I feel it's there sometimes and you sort of hear a voice, but that's just when problems arise, I think it's because you are turning to someone and hoping someone's there, and that's what you hear maybe . . . Yes, there's something there to look after you, always to make sure that you're making the right choice.*

*INT: Does this voice speak to you?*

*Tom: Aye, a distant voice, you can hear something. It's obviously not full conversation but you know he's there . . .*

Tom does not refer to this experience explicitly as spiritual, though the description does show similarities with some accounts collated by Hardy. Furthermore Tom, like many of the other respondents, refers to an ineffable something else: a transcendent reality in Hardy's terms, which is fundamental to religious experience.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> The minister once stopped the service and glowered at a restless child until her parents removed her from the church. Given his sober preaching style, and his insistence on silence, this would no doubt rule out any form of spontaneous worship.

<sup>125</sup> This distinguishes it from ritualistic activities such as golf, outlined previously from Geertz. The experience involves,

the feeling that there is a spiritual reality that *appears* to be beyond the conscious self with which the individual can have communion in one way or another - and whether spoken of as God or not - is indeed the most characteristic feature of the vast number of records we have received (Hardy, 1979: 132).

One particular case study is presented below from Sean who had taken part in the pilot study. It is exceptional in the context of accounts from the other respondents and represents the greatest fit with the literature on religious and spiritual experiences. Sean does not think of himself as spiritual, given the exigent qualities the term evokes. For example, his assertion that spiritual people are content – at one with themselves. He claims that his character does not correspond to his interpretation of the spiritual. Nevertheless, he claims a spiritual experience related to his father's death:

*Sean [Pilot: INT]: . . . I can feel him in the room sometimes and I can hear doors and that when I'm in the house on my own, it's just weird. It's not a scary feeling, it's comforting to know that somebody's watching out for you, it's just guidance . . . I did look at religion [for help]. They came and said 'God loves you, God loves you'. 'I don't give a damn, piss off!' It's not what I wanted to hear. I didn't want to hear about how this organisation of people loved me, because it made no sense. They didn't know me, how could they love me? . . . I just preferred at the time having somebody I could just talk to, just sit and open up and I think that makes you feel spiritual . . . I was sitting in my house one night, just all on my own and I saw somebody coming down the stairs and it was my dad, and it was weird because like he'd been dead three years, but there he was, and he walked through and then he disappeared again. It was like weird to know that he'd come, but that he wouldn't harm me, and that just brought me to the belief that he's there to guide me and look after me . . . [the experience] could have lasted for hours, it could have been minutes, it could have been seconds, it's just I had no concept of what was happening time wise . . . I dinnae believe at the time I should have told anybody because it was my experience . . .*

*INT: Did you tell your mum?*

*Sean: I have now . . . I think she noticed a change anyway because it just seemed to perk everything up, it was so great . . . Made me a better person knowing that death is not the final thing, it's a barrier you can pass through, there's always going to be somebody there to support you . . . He didn't have to say anything, there was understanding, no words passed it was just everything, understanding was there, it*

*was unbelievable . . . I walked after him and he was gone, but I've felt it since. I've no' seen him but I've felt him . . . it's like he'll tell you what to do but he'll no' speak, it's weird how it comes over the fact that no words are spoken but you know what's to be done and you know who it's from / Strange.*

His 'experience' appears to have altered his outlook on life though it is less clear whether this has altered his overall sense of well being, as Poloma suggests (1995).<sup>126</sup> Other responses from respondents include the experience of déjà vu, and sensing a presence. Levin (1993) reports age differences in 'mystical' experiences such as déjà vu, ESP and clairvoyance, observing that these beliefs decline slightly with age. Conversely, that numinous experiences and interest in spiritualism show a slight increase with age. Poloma likewise suggests that religious experiences can be differentiated by such factors as age, sex and ethnicity (1995).

Hornsby-Smith is critical of the paucity of research into religious or spiritual experiences, claiming that "[it] appears to be a 'social fact' that there has been relatively little in the way of the sociological investigation of religious experience" (1998: 430). Undoubtedly this is for a number of reasons, not least methodological problems involved in such an enterprise, including epistemological concerns. Acknowledging that the world comprises a tangible reality perceived by our senses (in the post-enlightenment rationalist tradition), means that anyone claiming an experience of transcendence poses a problem. Accounts and ways of understanding such experiences would necessitate considering a particular culture's explanatory model[s], and then deciding which account holds most credence according to some predefined criteria. In the rationalist tradition of modern secular societies, there might be recourse to psychological (in essence medical) or sociological explanations; for example, premised upon the axiom that the individual is suffering from some sort of delusion.<sup>127</sup> This is not a debate with which it is necessary to engage fully. Rather, to acknowledge that the idea of religious/spiritual experiences as ultimately

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<sup>126</sup> Poloma claims that religious experiences can be a predictor of well-being and that those scoring high on a religious experience index are likelier to perceive themselves as happier and have a greater sense of life satisfaction (1995:176).

<sup>127</sup> James (1979:387) berates these approaches as evincing a scientific bias against spirituality, and Poloma repeats this concern (1995:175).

mistaken, subjective and thereby inaccessible to reliable measurement, points to why such phenomena have been little researched sociologically.<sup>128</sup> More crucially, accounts of these experiences in terms of quality and quantity, allowing for the affect of such variables as age, gender and social class for example, can reveal something of the nature of society in which they occur. Specifically, why is it that claims of such experiences continue to proliferate in modern secular societies in which it is posited that religion has lost its social significance?

The answer in part lies in the decline of religion as institutions. On the surface it does indeed seem as though religion is increasingly relegated to a past era, staged collectively in compressed and compartmentalised social time and spaces. Indeed, Hornsby-Smith asks rhetorically whether it is possible "that contact with the sacred outside mainstream religion represents a (possibly unconscious) re-appropriation by lay people of direct contact with the divine?" (1998:430). This is not altogether helpful and implies some intrinsic need for religion or spirituality. Moreover, if this 're-appropriation' of the sacred were unconscious as he suggests, how would we ever know?

Poloma suggests that "religious experience remains a concept that suffers from poor conceptualisation, operationalization and measurement in sociology" (1995:166). In contrast to Berger (1979), she stresses the normalcy of religious experiences, though she follows his phenomenological emphasis in distinction to the Durkheimian focus upon structure. To substantiate this claim of normalcy she refers to studies that apparently demonstrate the ubiquity of religious experiences. For example, Greeley (1987) who maintains that 'mystical experiences' (interchangeable with religious experience) are part of mainstream culture. Further support is presented from a 1989 American Gallup poll survey citing 43% of respondents claiming an experience (Gallup and Jones, 1989:164).<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> See Woofit (1992 - introduction) for an outline of social scientific criticism of 'paranormal' accounts.

<sup>129</sup> This type of data collection is weak, however, since it is often not representative and obscures actors' meanings.

In Hardy's collection of 'religious experiences' he observed just how small a part institutional religion played in the accounts. The point being that whilst religious institutions are declining in many parts of the western world, the decline of religiosity need not necessarily be extrapolated from this. The religious experience to Hardy resonates with the transcendent and can be both numinal and mystical, a distinction also drawn by Hay (1982: 69). Specifically, the experience relates to a sense of there being something else there – a "spiritual reality" (Hardy, 1979:132:) – which exists beyond the conscious self. It is this sense of 'Something More' which expresses the transcendent, perhaps initiated or provoked by the sense of a presence or through nature, and may even lead to conversion; alternatively it may be personalised and initiate prayer. Central to the alleged experience is the way in which the individual views the world afterwards. This may culminate in an alteration of behaviour and attitudes.

The preceding data suggests that the experiential element features as a strong component of spirituality. This concerns images generally associated and/or evoked by nature, suggesting a feeling of something else, of possibilities and liminalities. Overall, few recounted experiences that culminated in dramatic life-altering effects and none led to conversion to a particular religion. For the practising Christians, these experiences reaffirmed and strengthened their faith. Several respondents claimed to have had some nebulous contact with the spiritual realm, with stories emerging in the focus groups. However, as noted earlier, respondents were more at ease with the topic in a one to one encounter, which illuminates the privatisation of spirituality in which

it is very often seen as an embarrassment, not to be talked about or even admitted to oneself . . . privatization dissipates the potential of spirituality to change society because it cannot feed easily into public understanding or political legislation (Hay and Nye, 1998:18).



## 5.14 Homing in on Spirituality

Given the notion of privatised spirituality, it is perhaps not surprising that the primary influence for most respondents is the home. The previous chapter explored the meanings of religion from the perspective of respondents. It was shown that the majority of Christians come from homes in which parents also attend church; most of them discuss Christianity to varying degrees, primarily with their mother. Similarly, non-Christians and those who define themselves as spiritual, find a forum for discussion at home. For example, Esther (SS) considers herself slightly spiritual and had been a nominal church-goer with a grandmother when younger, describing her parents as currently spiritual:

*Esther: [SS: INT] Both my parents have a strong influence on me. I'll listen to their opinions. My mum when she was younger went to Sunday School and I know she didn't like it . . . But she's, I don't think she's religious, I've asked her 'do you believe?' and she says, 'well, I don't know'. I don't think she could say for definite whether she did or she didn't, but certainly she's not religious . . . Both my parents think it's caused so much trouble so it's best not to believe. They would never, even if they did believe, I don't think they would go to church. They would believe themselves and wouldn't share it with anyone. My dad, we often talk about these things, why we're here and everything. I listen to him, he plays a big role in my life. He always, if I'm upset he will tell me to go out and look at the stars to put things into perspective. He's always told me we are just this tiny place, and he said to me, 'I can't say for definite whether there's a God or not, because it's hard to take something in like that'. When he was younger he went to Sunday School, but it's never played a big role in his life. He'll get a religious book out just because it interests him, but I wouldn't say he's religious, he's got an open mind about things.*

Sophie would not describe herself as either religious or spiritual, but she represents a further example of the salience of home based discussions of religiosity. At home she discussed her parent's beliefs with them:



*Sophie [SS: INT]: I know at least that my mum believes in God, or believes at least something. She doesn't go to church and she's not really religious but I think that she believes that there's a God. I think my dad believes that as well, but I think that's to do with their upbringing . . . I know both my gran and nan were really into things like that, they would go to church. Mum and dad haven't forced any religious beliefs on me but I think they do actually think I believe in God.*

*INT: They THINK you believe in God?*

*Sophie: I think they do and I don't think they'd be too pleased, I don't know, I got the feeling they'd not be too pleased to find out that I don't and I'm not religious in the slightest.*

As with Christianity, so too with spirituality: respondents who were able to discuss their beliefs at home with their parent or parents tended to hold stronger beliefs. This supports the argument that familial factors play a strong role in the religiosity of their daughter/son, and may indicate a privatisation of religion from the church to the home.

**5.15 Conclusion**

The table below summarises differences perceived by respondents in their descriptors of spiritual/ity and religious. This excludes the EC and MC groups because of their tendency to view the concepts as coterminous to a greater extent.

**Table 4 Distinctions Between Religiousness and Spirituality**

<b>Spiritual</b>	<b>Religion</b>
Positive	Negative
Future Orientated and Universal	Traditional/ Conservative
Universalistic	Particularistic
Inclusivist	Exclusivist
Active	Static
Autonomous and reified self	Determined self
Experiential and Reflexive	Prescriptive- Authoritarian
Relativistic	Absolutist
Discontinuous Involvement	Continuous Involvement
Individualistic	Public/Institutional
Impersonal/super-natural Power	Personal God
Eclectic	Homogenous

The concept of spiritual and its derivative – spirituality - were difficult to articulate, particularly in contrast to religion. In substantive terms to the non-church groups, being spiritual does not necessitate belief in God. The preceding chapters have shown that spirituality is less antithetical to most respondents than being religious. The former is preferred because of its private nature and individualism in the sense of there

being no external authority within an institution citing creeds and dogma. Spirituality is compatible with the modern era since it is apparently less traditional (static) and conveys concern for the global future of the planet. Spirituality can be accessed by anyone, unlike readings of Christianity, which are deemed exclusivist. Personal experiences are accorded high value, as is the idea that the content of being spiritual is open to endless interpretation.

The eclecticism of spirituality is considered positive, suffused with an understanding that 'involvement' (profound thoughts and particular actions) need not be consistent and systematic. Rather, spirituality is a cultural resource to be accessed during times of crisis (brief or enduring) and spontaneous periods of self-reflection (Beckford, 1989: 71).<sup>130</sup> Spirituality mostly excludes formal worship, and is not necessarily collective; nor is there a specific locus, such as a church – there being little emphasis upon the importance of structured place and time. Spirituality is self-directed, less bounded and accords primacy of place to the individual.

The stories of religious or spiritual experiences recorded in this study show two outstanding accounts: Sean and his deceased father, and Steve witnessing his mother talking in tongues. The others are less spectacular and taken-for-granted, with church-goers claiming enhanced closeness with God, and non-theistic experiences relating to feelings of a presence or a sense of wonderment inspired by nature.

There are some overlapping features between the non-Christian spirituality described throughout and spirituality defined as New Age; for example, self-autonomy and the centrality of the freedom to choose. Respondents emphasised this in their criticism of Christianity. Similarly, Heelas discerns the import of self-direction as a feature of New Age religion in contrast to Christianity, which is considered to inhibit a sense of self-determinism (1996:38). A further similarity with some New Age spiritualites is the importance of direct action, eco-warriors for example, identified by a minority of respondents, motivated by concern for the environment (1996:84).

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<sup>130</sup> Beckford argues that conceiving religion as a cultural resource rather than an institution reflects modern forms of flexibility and unpredictability. Also, it allows for the fact that people may access religion despite not having any institutional affiliation (1989: 71).

Interestingly, members of the EC also place high value upon self-direction and interpretation of their religion.<sup>131</sup> Possibly such value shifts focusing upon increasing freedom of the individual have emerged into mainstream cultures from the 1960's counter-cultural developments (see Roof, 1993:68).

Despite New Age ideology appearing extremely heterogeneous, Heelas draws out several features of consistency. Some cognisance of these features highlights the distinction between New Age religion or spirituality (Heelas uses the terms interchangeably) from the spirituality discussed by the respondents herein. Those involved with New Age yield to it as "a way of life, a set of values, which apparently rupture or transcend what modernity has to offer" (Heelas, 1996: 3), a self spirituality which problematises life for example, explaining why life is not as it ought to be and offering prescriptions and the means to attaining salvation (*ibid.*, 18). Those involved view their selves as essentially spiritual and seek an authentic experience through their inner spirituality. Rituals and practices such as meditation and other psycho-technologies represent an attempt to dissolve the ego and reach 'the other side' (*ibid.*, 20). 'Teachers' are often involved to assist adherents in their experiences of spirituality, imbued with authority and their own spirituality.

These characteristics illustrate some fundamental differences between those engaged in the New Age and the younger respondents' genre of spirituality. There is little evidence of the features presented by Heelas above; most adhere firmly to what modernity has to offer and do not reject it. For example, an orientation towards achievement and success encouraged by an apparently meritocratic education system is strong. They also hold the conviction that the individual has the power to shape his/her own life. Major concerns revolve around valued transitions of modernity such

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<sup>131</sup> Freedom of belief and action is also central to many of the respondents interviewed by Heelas. They commented on the importance of their own choice of beliefs, " 'freedom to be myself', 'you don't have to conform to any set dogma', 'it's my personal religion', 'I chose it because it feels right to me' . . ." (Heelas, 1996: pp.26-27). In addition, those associated with New Age tend to critique religions like mainstream Christianity as traditional, dead and exclusivistic (*ibid.*, 23) similar to the respondents in this study.

as passing exams, and moving into further education or work. There is little indication of seeking an apparently authentic experience through their own inner spirituality, though Sean did talk of not being able to be at one with his self, the end-product of spirituality.

The data from respondents and literature surveyed suggests a shift in the religious landscape. Although there is general agreement on the characteristics of spirituality, the main difference is one of emphasis. The MC regard spirituality as a taken-for-granted constituent of being religious in the Christian sense, whereas the EC regard spirituality as a possible and desirable development of being religious: a transmutation grounded in the absorption of Christian beliefs enhancing union with God. This goes beyond compliance with the role of being Christian.

Spirituality to the vast majority of non-churchgoing respondents is highly idiosyncratic, reflexive and characteristically eclectic. It can be distinguished from religion by its lack of grounding in formal structures, historically dominated by the church. This modern genre of spirituality hinges on a strong sense of agency, of freedom from restrictions in thought and behaviour. This perceived self-determinism is also of considerable import in the 'self religions' of the New Age outlined by Heelas (1991, 1996). Despite some similarity, the most fundamental difference is that whilst the 'self religions' feature a monist tendency to focus on "the god within" (Heelas, 1991: 167) through psychological techniques, respondents in this study do not engage in similar behaviour.

There was a limited sense of any association of consumerism with spirituality, though it is worth noting that this age group lack the resources to buy into this market; thus the age of respondents impacts upon the shape of the spirituality enunciated. Respondents relegate their version of spirituality to the private sphere and do not actively pursue any holistic version that might entail mediation through New Age enclaves, and/or accordant literature.

Much of the current identification of spirituality amongst Christians and non-Christians alike, affirms an increasing sense of openness in reaction to a multiplicity of other beliefs. For some Christians this has the effect of increasing their faith, whilst simultaneously conferring the values extolled by youth such as freedom to choose, and freedom consequently to negotiate personal meanings of Christianity *ad infinitum*.

Besides humanity's relationship to the environment and concern for others, relationships with friends, family and future partners add a further dimension to spirituality. Like Roof's (1993) boomers (the current middle-aged generation of the US), an important component of spirituality is the emphasis attributed to lasting relationships, and meaningful action in the world, though the latter is less apparent amongst respondents here. In this sense however, they share with the boomers the idea of spirituality as a way of thinking about things and contemplation. It is about immediacy, fairness and of reverence for nature (Roof, 1993: pp. 16-17).

From the evidence in the chapters on religion and spirituality, inter-generational changes can be deduced. Some respondents discussed grand-parents and parents who had been church-attendees. As younger children they shared in this activity to an extent. However, as they moved out of modern childhood these beliefs and activities began to be discarded, supporting Davie's claim that "belief in God (and specifically belief in a personal God) declines with each step down the age scale, as, indeed, does practice, prayer and moral conservatism" (1990:457). The precise shape of the future generation's religiosity is not known, but current trends suggest that it is unlikely to be that of the familiar church. However, a wider definition of religion might provide some indicators. This is discussed in the following chapter based upon the premise that:

If we widen the definition of religion to include questions about the meaning of life, the purpose of mankind's existence, the future of the planet and man's responsibilities to his fellow man and to the earth itself, we may find a very different pattern of 'religious' behaviour amongst the young. . . [this] may respond to these profound ecological, moral, ethical (and surely religious) issues much more positively than they do to traditional religious instruction (Davie, 1999:462).

## Chapter 6 Common Religion: Background Noise

### 6.1

This chapter considers other features of religiosity that do not conform to standard Christian models. Davie argues that people increasingly believe without belonging to a church (1990), so it makes sense to explore these beliefs, consolidating the data already presented. The thesis has suggested that rather than conforming to an institutionally defined doctrine, individuals select their religious beliefs from a 'religious supermarket'. This 'pick'n'mix' (Bruce, 1996) religiosity straddles the boundaries of orthodox religiosity, but is narrower than Luckmann's invisible religion (1967), and Bailey's implicit religion (1983).

There have been various attempts to categorise non-institutional religiosity as 'popular', 'folk', or 'superstition'. Towler and Chamberlain's (1973) conception of 'common religion' adds to this body of literature and is explored in what follows.

The array of beliefs and practices presented below are untidy and unsystematic, hence by nature, difficult to categorise by any conception of religion. It will become clear that in so far as these beliefs and behaviours relate to some notion of transcendence (something external to ourselves),<sup>119</sup> common religion as a model offers some conceptual advantages compared to other terms referred to, including Hornsby-Smith's 'customary religion' – introduced to challenge and develop the expediency of 'common religion' (Hornsby-Smith, 1985). Neither term is immune from criticism, however.

The subsequent topics have been categorised on the basis of typical features and characteristics from the respondents' perspectives, without attempting to enforce assumptions of coherence. Worsley warns against imposing "a spurious unity . . . onto other people's belief[s] . . . [avoiding an] over-systematisation of belief" (1970:300-1), so at this juncture it is worth re-emphasising that respondents' beliefs and associated practices do not inevitably correspond to any conception of 'system'.



Some of what follows overlaps with representations of spirituality from the preceding chapter, for example, experience's of a religious or spiritual nature, and beliefs approximating transcendence. The relationship between spirituality and common religion is considered, therefore.

## 6.2 Sensing and Making Sense of the Supernatural

[RS: INT]

*David: You think of ghostly things and things like that; out of the ordinary type things and things that happen that sort of, you could say SHOULDN'T happen outwith the laws of physics and all that / but basically you hear of people . . . Weird things happen. That's what I usually think of the supernatural, things like that.*

David's definition shares proximity to the boundaries that embrace the term 'paranormal'. Thalbourne (1982) for example, defines the paranormal as processes that are apparently physically impossible, similar to David's 'out of the ordinary', above.<sup>120</sup>

This sub-section presents data on what might be considered the respondents' perceptions of the supernatural. As the respondents unpack their beliefs, their everyday taken-for-grantedness becomes obvious as they struggle to allude to empirical referents to justify particular beliefs and actions. Justification and legitimisation of their beliefs is based upon either direct personal experience, and

<sup>119</sup> Transcendence, according to Van Hove (1996) is an essential component of religiosity. The term may also refer to the supernatural, or Luhmann's other-worldliness (1977:46).

<sup>120</sup> Thalbourne advises that the term be used for, "any phenomenon that in one or more respects exceeds the limits of what is *deemed* physically possible *according to current scientific assumptions*" (1982). Thalbourne and O'Brien (1999) have conducted extensive research into the paranormal from a psychological perspective, utilising scales that are primarily Christian-centric representations of religiosity. Some of these measures are vague in the meanings they intend to convey, as the authors themselves concede. Their conclusion is that amongst religious groups studied, there is not a significant correlation between religious affiliation and paranormal beliefs. Religiosity according to the scales they used is only a minor correlate of belief in the paranormal.

what others have said (significant others, and grapevine knowledge),<sup>121</sup> including the media.<sup>122</sup>

In this study, *evidence* of the supernatural is not of great personal import to those who believe. For instance, it does not have to be experienced first-hand, and there was little sign of rehearsed and coherent supporting narratives for their claims. Accounts from others, for example, were often all that was warranted to sanction their beliefs, typified in what follows. However, their beliefs require some justification to others like myself, to confer a degree of reasonableness:

*Angela: [I: SS] I thought there was probably like, something out there before, but that [friend's 'experience'] sort of like, made me think, there's definitely got to be something.*

*Stephen: [I: SS] I'd believe . . . if it happened to someone close.*

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<sup>121</sup> Ball and Vincent (1998) discuss the way in which the spreading of reputations amongst loose informal networks represents 'grapevine knowledge'. See also Walter and Waterhouse, (1999:193) who argue that beliefs in reincarnation, for example, are believed in on the basis of either personal experiences or knowledge of others' experiences. Similarly, Bowman introduces the idea of the 'belief story' into this area, urging that,

the narrative (i.e. story telling) process itself [is] an ongoing, constantly evolving feature of religion. Of particular significance in vernacular religion, for example, is the 'belief story'. This is characterised by Gillian Bennett (1989:291) as that class of stories which:

1. illustrate current community beliefs;
2. tell not only of personal experiences but also of those that have happened to other people;
3. are used to explore and validate the belief traditions of a given community by showing how experience matches expectations (Bowman, 2000:85)..

Bowman suggests further that "when there is no commonly recognised written canon, and where informal modes of transmission of belief predominate, belief stories should be seen as particularly significant" (2000:86). 'Grapevine knowledge' in this sense is vernacular religion as it is played out on a day-to-day basis.

<sup>122</sup> The media is often implicated in the inculcation of paranormal type beliefs, though relatively little research has been conducted on the impact of this specific area. Weimann (1985) argues for a strong link between media and a wide range of occult beliefs and practises. One problem with making this link, however, is that it tends to assume a passive audience. In response, Weimann maintains that the media probably reinforces these types of beliefs rather than constructing them initially. Arguing from the perspective of Gerbner's findings about television viewers (1976) she continues that all TV contents, regardless of whether or not they deal with the occult or paranormal are a mixture of accuracy and distortion, given that the media is in the business of projecting a distorted reality. For a similar argument see Sparks, G. G. 'Paranormal depictions in the Media' (1998).

Claire (RS) claimed to have had personal experiences of the supernatural, similar to other respondents. This either confirmed previously tenuous beliefs, or provoked belief where none had been present. Claire's biographical details indicate that she was a church-goer at Primary School, with both parents, after her mother had switched from Catholicism to Protestantism. Having rejected the central Christian beliefs, Claire's interest and search for ultimate answers continues, a pattern common to the majority of non-Christian respondents.

[PRS: I]

*Claire: There have been so many times in my life when I'm like, so sure there's somebody else there and I know they're not physically, and I'm certain there's somebody with me. And [I was] speaking to somebody about it and they were like, 'well, supposedly everyone has got a protector', and stuff like that, and I always feel there is someone looking out for me . . . I've sensed there's been somebody there as well, but in general day to day life I feel there's always somebody looking after me . . . [S]o many people have told me so many things that have happened to them and it's not like, something, it's not people that would make something up like that / just believable stories that I would say could definitely happen. So I do believe in stuff like that.*

Talking about her experiences with others and establishing that some had similar experiences, confirmed *her* reality of the supernatural. Reference to an un-particularised 'something' provided a satisfactory explanation. Whilst this is entirely unsatisfactory to some people, McDonald (1998) suggests various possible reasons. His psychological experiments indicate that people are inclined to accept a hypothesis pertaining to the paranormal in the absence of other explanations. This is why some people embrace these accounts. Respondents across the groups recounted personal stories of having directly experienced something inexplicable, such as seeing a ghost or sensing a presence, typically narrating the tale with an almost formulaic setting of the scene. First they describe a mundane activity that they were engaged in. Then the 'experience', followed by attempts to evoke seemingly rational explanations for the occurrence, and concluding with a degree of acceptance that

something 'out of the ordinary' happened. Other explanations, such as 'a trick of the light' proved less convincing. Correspondingly, Woofit depicts standardised stories of the paranormal in research analysed through discourse analysis (1992).

The media are strongly cited as 'evidence' for belief in something 'out there', the argument being that the media do not merely invent stories, but are transmitters of facts. This applies to a wide spectrum of beliefs, from ghosts, to aliens and conspiracy theories. Little suggestion was made of media fabrications and moral panics, nor of distortions of reality as sociologists in this field often claim.<sup>123</sup>

Baudrillard (1972) is instructive here. Drawing attention to the elision of imagery and the real, he argues that the construction of the hyper-real militates against distinguishing fact from fiction. Rather than the media reflecting reality, the media attempts to constitute reality as more real than real. Baudrillard highlights the extent to which people have become dependent on textual evidence disseminated via media channels, as respondents' stories seem to suggest. However, his post-modern analysis of media and hyper-reality perhaps goes a step too far in the assumption that people passively consume media messages, though there is no doubt that some media representations of apparently factual messages impact upon the imagination of some viewers some of the time. For instance:

*INT: Can you give me an example that helped you to reach the conclusion that there is such a thing as supernatural powers?*

*David [I: RS]: You hear stories when you are watching the telly, what was it? . . . 'Strange But True', things like that, and they cannae all be lies and made up.*

*Stephen [I: SS]: . . . There must be some truth in all the things you get told, there must be some truth . . .*

*Robert [I: SS]: You see all these programmes . . .*

*Kerry [SS: FG]: . . . Stuff like the 'X-Files' and stuff, that just makes it seem so probable.*

The category – supernatural – appeared in the preceding chapter as a component of spirituality. Most respondents professed belief in an external supernatural power. Other studies amongst similar age groups confirm the rising trend in these type of beliefs, but stop short of exploring their content (for example, Furnham and Gunter, 1989). Some respondents in this research impute a considerable range of features to their interpretation of the supernatural, drawing upon elements that feature in Towler and Chamberlain's (1973) 'common religion':

[RS: I]

*Jude: [it's] something that's not normal; something that the majority of people don't have, like psychic abilities . . .*

*INT: Do you think there are supernatural powers then?*

*Jude: I think there can be, yes. ESP, sometimes in certain circumstances then yes, I can sort of accept it. And being able to see into the future. I don't know about that. Possibly. It's totally possible. I've never experienced anything like that, but it doesn't mean to say it doesn't exist.*

During the focus group, Jude recounted an alleged direct experience that suggests to her the possibility of returning as a ghost after death. Personal experiences of this kind often bear a relationship to whether or not the respondent believes in the possibility of reincarnation, as Jude does.<sup>124</sup>

[RS: FG]

*Jude: I was in one place, it was the FIRST time I had ever been there, it was like some sort of castle with a big garden and loads of different walks and I managed to*

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<sup>123</sup> For instance, for paranormal research and the media, see Sparks, (1998), Weimann, (1985), Woofit, (1992).

<sup>124</sup> This association is suggested in other studies - Furnham and Gunter (1989); Blackmore (1994); Walter and Waterhouse (1999), and Waterhouse, (1999).

*take my entire family round it without getting lost. I knew exactly where I was going . . . I was scared. I was like, 'oh my god!' Cause I knew exactly where to turn, exactly everything about it and it scared me cause there was nobody there who'd ever been there before.*

Given the range of beliefs and experiences above, as well as the meanings attached to them, one question that arises is – what type of religiosity are we seeing here? Further, to what extent does this fit into an existing framework? Indeed, is there an existing framework that is able to incorporate and explain so-called occult-like, paranormal and/or supernatural beliefs?

## **6.2 Common Religion?**

In this section the detail of common religion is considered in relation to beliefs expressed by respondents. Their beliefs constitute a challenge to one of the claims of secularisation theories – that eclectic and privatised beliefs only affect a minority, and these beliefs and practices are *not* socially significant.

Most non-church-goers expressed belief in something, with statements such as

*Sophie [SS: FG]: Really, there must be a reason why we are here, we can't just be here to go to school and die at the end. We can't just be born and die for no reason, there must be something . . .*

*Jude [RS: FG]: There has to be something else, there's too many gaps.*

Statements such as these suggest a human thirst for otherness, purpose and meaning, much in the vein of authors like Hardy (1979), James (1963), and sociologists Stark and Bainbridge (1985). Respondents' testimonies indicate a realm of religiosity outwith specific structures characteristic of denominational affiliations, New Religious Movements, and even looser than New Age accounts.



Religiosity flourishes in part as a result of the failure of science to provide coherent and cogent explanations of alleged experiences and reported accounts. However, since the vast majority had been brought up with varying aspects of church-going and associated Christian beliefs, the effect of diffusion upon subsequent beliefs and openness to religiosity cannot be discounted. Knowledge and belief in the supernatural or paranormal phenomena may be a tributary of earlier beliefs.

Common religion is defined as:

Those beliefs and practices of an overtly religious nature which are not subject to continued control by the churches and whose significance and importance will not usually be recognised by the churches . . . [They are] highly thematic in form, and [do] not occur as a systematically elaborated set of codes and beliefs (Towler and Chamberlain, 1973).

At this point problems of definition re-emerge. Although the definition above is arguably vague, it distinguishes church-type religion from a more general religiosity beyond direct institutional control. This is crucial and confers some superiority to the concept.

### **6.3     Developing Common Religion: Supernatural Elements in Folk Tradition**

Wolffe (1993) has developed the work of Towler, distinguishing common religion as four sub-themes. These are discussed with corresponding data from the thesis.

The first category refers to the supernatural elements of folk tradition or folk religion, which are 'half-beliefs'<sup>125</sup> – beliefs that are not seriously adhered to. Examples include belief in luck associated with black cats, four leafed clovers and first-footing on New Year's Eve. The content of beliefs is contingent upon locality and dependent upon close knit communities for their vitality, an important factor to



bear in mind when considering why some of these beliefs exhibit a trend towards declining significance. However, Towler may have overstated this weakening since new beliefs (see below) continue to be accommodated to features of the environment. The existence of new beliefs in keeping with modern developments suggests that the decline in close knit communities has not impacted upon such beliefs to the extent that Towler maintains, and that perhaps community networks continue to exist in a different form. One modern example is superstitious behaviour associated with ambulances and post vans:

[SS: FG] (after having written a list of personal superstitions)

*INT: . . .somebody's written touch red when a Royal mail van passes? . . .*

*Esther: I touch back.*

*Sophie: It's black.*

*Paul: Red.*

*INT: What happens if you touch red or black if a . . .?*

*Esther: You get good luck.*

*Sophie: What about bad luck if you don't touch it?*

*Esther: [agrees] Aha.*

*Jude [I: RS]: There's traditionally four leafed clovers. If I found one of them I'd put it under my pillow. But I don't believe in stuff like walking under ladders is bad luck [or] putting shoes on the table is bad luck. Mum went mad at me once because I was about to put my new trainers on the table to show her.*

The beliefs in this category are dynamic and evolving, and demonstrate the importance of context in the content of beliefs held. They also reveal the spontaneity of these beliefs in people's lives – for example, an *unexpected* encounter with a particular vehicle demands a specific behavioural response. Such beliefs are not considered often, nor do they constitute a substantial part of an individual's worldview; rather they are something in the background, coming to the fore in response to an encounter with the unlucky/lucky object.

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<sup>125</sup> Martin refers to these as 'subterranean theologies' (1967: 74-6).

The following category corresponds closely to the first, though differences are certainly not clear-cut. The primary difference, according to Wolffe, rests upon the assumption that the beliefs are more diffuse and wider ranging in content. In itself though, this suggests that a new category is rather superfluous.

#### **6.4 Diffuse Elements of Superstition and Supernatural Conviction**

Wolffe identifies generalised elements of superstition and supernatural conviction as a more diffuse version of the above. The main difference, he suggests, is that these lack variety and a community character, nor do they suggest a linked system of ideas.

Existing evidence on superstition in Britain is limited and largely based upon Abercrombie's 1968 Islington study. Women, manual workers (based upon earlier employment categories), the young and elderly, as well as nominal Christians tend to engage most in superstitious types of behaviour according to the aforementioned study. Examples include belief in luck, demonstrated through behaviours such as touching wood, hesitancy about the number thirteen, and belief in the power of prayer. Consider the following examples:

*[SS: FG]*

*Sophie: One day my shower broke, then my cooker broke, so I broke a match.*

*INT: You broke a match?*

*Esther: Yeah, you do that. We do that, whenever a thing breaks cause it comes in threes.*

*Sophie: So you break a match and make sure it doesn't happen again.*

*INT: So you would literally do that?*

*Sophie: I did!*

*Esther: We do it. My mum does it.*

*Sophie: I did it in case something else happened.*

[PRS: FG](Talking about exams)

*Lucy: I got a locket with a picture of my grandparents and that helps, cause I remember the night before my drama exam, I couldn't find my locket and I was frantic. I was just like, panicking cause I couldn't find it.*

*Sonia: It's not even like, I think I'm gonnae fail my exam. I just think, well, if one of the things is not there and then I fail it, it could've been that.*

These practices occur within a modern context, illustrating the dynamic and changing nature of such beliefs and practices. Esther and Sophie are particularly superstitious, taking personal artefacts (jewellery) into exams in a bid to maximise their success. Many of the respondents showed evidence of being superstitious, engaging in superstitious 'rituals' motivated by fear of uncertainty about situational outcomes, and 'just in case' there was some validity in acting superstitiously. Overall, females did not tend to be more superstitious than the males in this study. The main differences in terms of gender centred upon the content of beliefs held. This is echoed in other research. For example, evidence from other studies reveals that men are more likely to believe in phenomena such as UFO's (Gray, 1990b; Clarke, 1991) discussed below. Although this study did not indicate this distinction, it highlights an association between sport and superstition with males, confirming an earlier finding from Gowling (1973), and later, Blackmore, (1994). It may be the case though, that gender distinctions become more pronounced with age as some adults imbibe and act upon socially gendered roles more fully:

[WF: FG]

*Michael: I've got a lucky golf shirt.*

*INT: How do you know it works?*

*Michael: Cause I play well when I wear it . . . And I've got combinations as well with different trousers; one shirt with these and another one with some others . . . I feel better if I'm wearing a certain shirt*

[SS: FG]

*Paul: I wear a number, we've got numbers, it used to be number two but now it's sixteen, sixteen my lucky number . . . We're [the football team] doing quite well.*

Miller (1992) administered measures of scientific understanding to large samples of American adults. He suggests that the substantial quantity of people who believe in lucky numbers have “profound misunderstandings of probability and chance”, claiming a correlation between leaving school early and belief in lucky numbers (1992:7). This implies that if people were better educated, there would be a corresponding decline in the quantity of superstitious actors. Michael however, has gone on to university after passing *Higher* exams and gaining several *Advanced Certificates* mostly in science, so is certainly not poorly educated.

The essence of a superstitious act according to Campbell

is the individual's belief that the cathartic activity is directly linked in some manner with the desired outcome, in other words the presence of a belief that what the individual is doing will influence the outcome in a desired fashion (1996:155).

Hence, wearing a particular number will enable the wearer to play at his best. Superstitious behaviours can form part of collective ritual action, but many are individualistic, and unrelated to a system of beliefs.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, people profess little faith in the desired outcome of a superstitious act. This distinguishes them from pre-modern superstitious practices that were more collectively oriented in nature, and conviction of belief in the intended outcome was stronger (Campbell, 1996:156).

Why is it then, that many engage in superstitious practices whilst claiming that they do not really believe? Campbell's response is that “the practise is self-sustaining in the sense that it does not require any justification in terms of accompanying beliefs” (1996:158). These then are ‘half-beliefs’, as Towler suggests, though Towler fails to develop sufficient explanation. Campbell (1996) surmises that people engage in stereotyped superstitious practises not only for reassurance but also from a need to be

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<sup>126</sup> Collective examples include superstitions associated with weddings – ‘just for fun’ type beliefs.

*active* rather than *passive*. This is an important dichotomy in relation to the notion of human agency. The behaviour initiated by superstitious beliefs represents a *doing* activity, an important value of modern society, as opposed to more fatalist orientations of pre-traditional society. In this sense, superstitious practices are reasonable, and signify a sense of being in charge of one's life, re-affirming the value of instrumental action. However, there is a paradox here:

Individuals reaffirm their faith in the power of human agency through an act which, although instrumental in form, they know will not achieve the desired end. Thus whilst instrumental acts are normally contrasted with ritual acts, here the ritual act mimics an instrumental one (Campbell, 1996:163).

Whilst most Christian respondents did not claim to be superstitious, insisting that superstitious people are looking for something to blame for their misfortune, Samantha and Simon (EC) admitted to being moderately superstitious. Simon, because he did some acting in his spare time, justified this behaviour on account of the association between actors and superstition. Both he and Sarah claimed to have suffered misfortunes on 'Friday the thirteenth'. The non-superstitious Christians refuted their claims:

[EC: FG]

*Thomas: I think things like that are just the same status as old wives tales, but the fact that people carry superstitions, if they notice they've done something, I think that puts them in the state of mind to make things happen.*

*INT: Would you walk under a ladder?*

*Samantha: I wouldn't.*

*Simon: Bad things have happened to me on Friday the thirteenth. I was in a play, it was a competition and the year before we won it . . . [I]t was Friday and I was certain I wasn't gonnae win it . . . It ended up it was the two person play that won it . . . That was Friday the thirteenth, that's what we blamed it on.*

*Samantha: I fell in a pond feeding a duck on Friday the thirteenth.*

The beliefs in this category are not obviously distinct from the first category, despite Wolffe's claim. Luck and superstition feature in the content of both. There are limited gender differences in terms of the content of beliefs, though this can be seen in the association between sport and gender, a typically masculine social sphere.<sup>127</sup> Some of the beliefs and practises are overtly ritualistic in nature, engaged in to maximise the chances of success towards a desired end, but there is no clear reason why the beliefs and practises above occupy distinct sub-sections of common religion in the absence of more detailed rationale. The following category however, is more elaborate and distinctive, consisting of longer standing beliefs in historical and cross-cultural terms.

## **6.5 Specific Beliefs**

The third and largest sub-category of Wolffe's common religion incorporates more specific belief in external phenomena – ghosts and astrology, for example. Fortune telling and the paranormal are included. These are often associated with a range of so-called professional practitioners, conferring a quasi-scientific status and considerable authority, trust and expertise to their role. Whilst beliefs in the first two sub-categories show some evidence of decline, despite accommodation to the modern environment, beliefs of this third type are either stable or increasing in popularity. Other studies confirm this trend (Furnham and Gunter, 1989; Gallup and Basilla, 1992; Gill, 1998; BSA, 1999; Waterhouse, 1999).

Once again, a clear definition of the paranormal proves elusive. This is a multidimensional concept referring broadly to processes outside of accepted natural realms. Generally, research here lies within the boundaries of psychology, in

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<sup>127</sup> Buhrmann, Brown and Zaugg (1982) examined the superstitious beliefs and behaviour of a roughly equal number of basketball players of both genders. They found little difference in the number of superstitions endorsed and the degree of superstitiousness. This suggests that accessibility to context, in this case sport, is a cogent factor in any account of superstitious behaviour.



particular parapsychology divided between sceptics and believers.<sup>128</sup> Measures of paranormal belief range from ESP, belief in life after death and contact with the dead (Irwin, 1993:2). Some broader definitions incorporate superstition, magic, astrology, belief in angels, as well as UFO's. Some studies suggest that most people who believe in all, or some of the above, tend to be those lacking academic credentials (Abercrombie *et al*, 1979; Wolffe, 1993; Blackmore, 1994). One problem with this approach is the different yardsticks used to measure intelligence – IQ tests for example, are notoriously suspect.<sup>129</sup> Other studies are more explicit in attributing the foregoing association, contending that public misunderstanding of science is widespread, hence people uncritically embrace beliefs in UFO's, astrology and lucky numbers (Miller, 1992). Another suggested correlation highlights levels of alienation as an important factor in encouraging these beliefs as compensators.<sup>130</sup> The beliefs also tend to be stronger in young adults (Emmons and Sobal, 1981). This may be because young adults are a marginal group in terms of status and income. However, elderly people (also a socially marginalised group), reflect low levels of these beliefs. This questions the validity of a social marginality hypothesis, though when their cultural upbringing is considered the theory does not dissolve. Firstly, the media were not as far reaching in their effects upon beliefs as their current prominence confirms. Moreover, studies consistently report that the elderly are more likely to be religious than the rest of the population. It should be remembered therefore, that like young people, they also constitute a socially marginal group and are therefore alienated to varying degrees, fuelling their inclination towards religion. When this factor is taken into consideration, alongside the lack of consensus about the constituents of religion, the social deprivation hypothesis is not so weak.

Interpretations of the paranormal are similar to perceptions of the supernatural, with the former defined as a sub-realm of the latter. This topic animated the respondents

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<sup>128</sup> It is not my intention to make judgements about the truth or falsity of the claims made. For a sceptical critique, see Humpries, *Soul Searching* (1983). For a description of the methods used by people in presenting other-worldly stories, see Woofit, B. (1992) *Telling Tales of the Unexpected: The Organisation of Factual Discourse*. Woofit maintains that despite the fact that people who recount these 'tales' are at risk of appearing insane, many people continue to report them. Moreover, sociology tends to view their experiences as variously mistaken (1992-pp.1-2).

<sup>129</sup> For example, IQ tests are culturally biased in favour of white, middle class individuals.

<sup>130</sup> See Bainbridge (1978); Wuthnow (1976) on the so-called social marginality hypothesis



enormously, in sharp distinction to the banality and hostility associated with some interpretations of Christianity. Beliefs ranged widely from telekinesis, hauntings, mediumship, premonitions and hearing voices, to ouija boards.

Tom (SS) proved susceptible to paranormal beliefs, sanctioned by his mother in conjunction with the media, although he had not claimed to be religious or spiritual. The evidence he imputes to his beliefs is media induced in the guise of an alleged psychic:

[SS: FG]

*Tom: [Uri Geller] says bring out broken watches and put them in front of the telly and then, like . . . I think he said something, or shut his eyes and done, something, and then my mum says, 'it's working now!', but it definitely wasn't working before. .*

*INT: So how would you explain that?*

*Tom: I don't know . . . there must be something / aye.*

Neither Tom nor his mother believed that there was an alternative explanation, such as trickery or coincidence.<sup>131</sup> It should be noted however, that there was nearly as much scepticism regarding these beliefs as there was belief amongst respondents, though the majority believed in at least something within this category. What varied most was the extent of beliefs held.

Belief in paranormal or supernatural phenomena is linked to the belief in the existence of 'something else'. Overwhelmingly, whilst the Evangelical Christian respondents described similar phenomena as paranormal, their explanations emphasised the power of Satan as the driving impetus, a belief which has decreased amongst the general population (European Values, 1992; Gill, 1998).

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<sup>131</sup> An alternative explanation of the re-animation of watches proposed by Marks and Kammann (1980), is that watches which restart are those in which internal mechanisms have been clogged with dirt. Handling the watches (on Geller's instruction via TV) frees the mechanism by heating and agitating obstructive matter. Moreover, experiments show that holding and moving broken watches produces the same rate of positive results as techniques employed by people like Geller.

In a historical overview of belief in life after death, Walter suggests that it is during the teenage years that people protest their sense of selfhood most loudly (1996). It is during this time that there is an enhanced aversion towards one's own death, and it is little wonder that younger people embrace beliefs of this nature (1996: 41). The majority of respondents in this study expressed concern about death as the end of their own existence, confirming Walter's claim, though comparison of statements from other age-cohorts are precluded by a lack of studies.

## **6.5i Ghosts and Ouija boards**

Data on belief in ghosts collated by Gill (1998) indicates a rise in these beliefs in Britain, reaching 19% in the 1970's, and climbing to 31% in the 1990's. Walter's research shows that belief in ghosts and the paranormal is highest amongst 35-44 year olds, possibly because of "the young's exposure to ghosts and paranormal phenomena in movies and other media" (1996:42). Most respondents in this research professed belief in ghosts, the main difference residing in whether or not they are Christian.

### **Christians and Ghosts**

[EC: FG]

*Simon: I'd like to believe in ghosts.*

*INT: How would that tie in with God and Christianity?*

*Simon: Probably very badly because I think they've a strong belief that there's life after death, but in heaven . . .*

*Thomas: I don't believe, I don't believe personally in ghosts but at the same time, in terms of me being a Christian I believe there's some things I can't understand, and within that there might be stuff through God, which may be deemed as paranormal.*

*Marie: It's quite hard what you would put under the paranormal. UFO's and ghosts and ouija boards and stuff like that . . . I'm sure there are powers behind that and*

*I'm sure there are spirits which would mean ghosts as well . . . My friend says that ouija boards work . . .*

*Samantha: In magazines and stuff it's made out to be true.*

## **Non-Christians and Ghosts**

*[SS: FG]*

*Paul: My mum did a ouija board and it spelt a name, it was in a dark room and it spelt a name. A woman, the girl that was there's sister had just died and it spelt out her name on the board, and I think they all just scarpered and ran. My mum says she'll never do it again.*

*Sophie: I think there's something behind them.*

*Tom: I think so, aye, you do believe it. When you're young as well, you get all the ghost stories . . . There must be something, aye.*

*Fiona [RS:I]: You know how you get these photographs? Until they are proved wrong, then yes, I do believe.*

*Jane [RS: I]: I've never encountered anything like that, but you see programmes on the telly of people who think their house are haunted. . . . May be it's important to them, may be they think all these ghosts are people they have known that have died and are looking over them. I know a lot of people that say that.*

*Lynsey[RS: I]: I sort of believe in ghosts, when you dream about someone that's dead.*

Furnham and Gunter claim that younger people are more likely to profess belief in ghosts after having apparently experienced a 'presence' (1989:134). Respondents were just as willing to believe 'ghostly' stories from people not known to them as they were from people they were close too. However, amongst the few that claimed to have experienced a presence, there was little indication that the 'presence' was of

someone they had known. One recent study reports the opposite: the presence in the majority of cases is always that of a family member or friend, and usually at the deceased's home (Douglas, 1995:97). Gallup's study of American teenagers suggests that one young adult in three believes in ghosts and hauntings (1992:73). Research suggests then, that belief in ghosts is fairly widespread, and variously associated with factors like experiencing a presence, hauntings, contact with the dead and belief in life after death. The mass media appears to play a strategic role in sustaining these beliefs through apparent evidence such as the reconstruction of events and psychic 'authority' figures such as Uri Geller. Stories from friends and families also play a key role.

### **6.5ii Astrology**

Astrology is another area in which some belief in transcendence may be established, though not in all cases. Thomas contends that sixteenth century astrological doctrines comprised a large component of people's worldviews (1971:337). Moving on to contemporary society, levels of popular belief in astrology according to a 1988 British survey reports that although many people *read* their horoscopes, few take them seriously (6%).<sup>132</sup> Compared to those who profess belief in life after death or God, surveys generally present the figures for astrological belief as even less significant.

Research claims of belief in astrology being associated with factors such as low levels of scientific knowledge, and high levels of religiosity amongst people not affiliated to a religious institution are common (Bauer and Durant, 1997:61). Bauer and Durant suggest that people most likely to believe are those who "possess intermediate levels of scientific understanding, high levels of religiosity, and low levels of religious integration" (1997:67). Women are slightly more inclined towards this type of belief (Furnham and Gunter, 1989). Miller (1992) suggests a correlation with poor understandings of science similar to the authors above, claiming that two

in five Americans think that astrology has some scientific validity. However, women are significantly more likely to assent to this view, regardless of educational background.

Sociologically, belief in astrology may represent a compensatory activity attractive to people facing the uncertainties of modern life. As such “popular belief in astrology may be part and parcel of late modernity itself” (Bauer and Durant, 1997:69). Indeed, Giddens asks: “What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively day-to-day social behaviour” (1991:70). Modern astrologists comply with the above requests, merging their ‘insights’ into the pages of tabloid ‘news’ and popular women’s magazines:

*Simon [EC: I]: I do tend to look at my star signs a lot . . . In today’s Sunday magazine [reads horoscope from News of the World magazine] – I’m going on holiday soon, so that’s the ‘alien uniform’. ‘A serious commitment to health’ – I’m starting to go back to the gym . . . The thing about ‘private ambition’ – I think that’s something to do with my acting, whether to go to acting school or just go for a job and get money.*

*[SS: FG]*

*Esther: I read [horoscopes]. I won’t read them the day before in case I make things happen that way, so I read things after to see whether it was true . . . They’ve been true a couple of times . . . I’ve got my own star sign [book].*

*Kerry: I just read it cause my mum reads everybody’s out on a Sunday morning.*

*Esther: It tells you who’s your perfect match and stuff, and what kind of person you are and who your friends are.*

*Sara [WF: I]: When I read my horoscope, I wouldn’t say I believe in it. But I do read it and if it matches, I think wow!*

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<sup>132</sup> The 1988 British national survey of public understanding of science in Bauer and Durant, *Culture*

*Stephen [SS: I]: Aye, I believe it . . . I read it because I'm interested to see what it says.*

The comments above reflect a mixture of belief and Towler's expression, 'half-belief'. Belief in astrology is evidenced amongst a minority across the groups and markedly less so amongst the Christians. Simon and Samantha, the two least committed Christians in the survey profess belief in astrology. This belief was more common amongst female non-Christian respondents, as other studies confirm (Miller, 1994:4). However, although most females read their star sign, they claimed that this was for entertainment, a view echoed in research by Furnham and Gunter (1989), and Gallup (1992).<sup>133</sup>

Research in this area is inconclusive. It does suggest a high level of interest in astrology, and claims that women appear to be the most interested. However, the relationship between levels of educational attainment and belief in astrology is ambiguous. This lack of clarity is similarly evidenced in belief in aliens.

### **6.5iii Aliens**

One further theme that has not been substantially addressed by either Towler (1973), Hornsby-Smith (1985) or Wolffe (1993) is belief in aliens. This belief shares proximity to the category above since the beliefs are both specific and often accorded scientific status. Studies conducted show little relationship between beliefs and age, though in gender terms, males tend to embrace these beliefs more readily than females (Irwin, 1993:7; Blackmore, 1994:75). In particular, research into the impact of the media upon UFO and alien belief is scarce, despite the fact that,

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*and Cosmos*, 1997.

<sup>133</sup> The Gallup research suggests that adults between the ages of 18-29 are more likely to believe in astrology (Gallup, 1992:72).

[a] casual perusal of the mass media over the last few years reveals an overwhelming interest in content themes that are best described as dealing with the 'paranormal' (Sparks, Pellechia and Irvine, 1998:284).

However, not all belief in alien life-forms relates to the paranormal. Belief in alien life-forms is not necessarily paranormal: it is belief in alien visitations to earth that warrants this description.

Popular interest in UFO's began at the end of the Second World War, according to McIver, a researcher of UFO group membership (1997). She maintains that the limited research conducted in this area has not produced conclusive findings about UFO believers. However, most people involved in the groups are men whose formal education levels are higher than average (1997: 41). Moreover, many of these people also report belief in life after death, and belief in an impersonal spirit or life-force. A similar correlation is evidenced in this research. By contrast, Miller (1992) claims that there is little association between formal educational levels and belief in UFO's. Once again, misunderstandings of science are held to account. Millar expresses concern over public acceptance of these type of beliefs since, "misunderstandings may lead to unwise decisions in daily life and detract from an accurate understanding of the world in which we live" (1992:18). This also raises questions about the way science is currently taught in schools, and probabilistic situations in maths. In this sense, there are indeed social implications stemming from such beliefs.

However, Millar's perspective seems to accept uncritically the idea that science can be relied upon for information about the world and if only people were somehow more 'rational' the type of beliefs discussed would be eliminated. He fails to consider that science itself, in particular the currently orthodox paradigm spawned from Enlightenment thinking, is socially constructed and often more ambiguous and provisional than he is prepared to admit in his endeavour to deconstruct superstitious beliefs as basically ignorant.



## Non-Christians and Aliens

[SS: FG] (discussing alien life)

*Paul: [The Roswell incident] I don't think they've actually shown it to the world, so how are we meant to know?*

*Tom: If that happened then everyone should know about it cause it's everyone's world, it's not just the scientists that are looking . . .*

*Esther: I don't agree with the image of aliens that are out to kill us [promoted by the recent film 'Independence Day']*

*INT: Do you think that comes from the media then?*

*Paul: Aha. And all the stories about it . . .*

*Sophie: . . .even if it's all made up it's gotta come from somewhere . . . it doesn't like, just come to your mind for no reason.*

*Kerry: Stuff like the 'X-files' and stuff, that just makes it seem so probable, that there could be aliens out there and there might even be a massive government cover up.*

This discussion about the probability of alien life-forms can be located within the idea of conspiracy theories mentioned earlier in the thesis. The 'Roswell incident' due to media exposure and suggestion has evolved into a modern myth (Saler, 1997). The narrative features mainstream notions pertaining to aliens and their alleged craft, and these have become common currency in language. That is, society possesses a common vocabulary and set of idioms for talk of this nature. Saler contends that the idea of conspiracy theories appeals because the idea undermines the modern value of our right to know. 'Revealing' the alleged knowledge can lead to salvation in the sense of learning that we are not alone in the universe (1997:149).

[RS: FG]

*Jude: There has to be more than just us out there, HAS TO BE, cannae just be us in this one planet, this small little planet, there cannae be nothing, there has to be something out there, whether they're green little men.*

*David: I think there's something out there, a supernatural realm if you like . . . I think there's something above us but I don't think like, it's little green men*

Support for belief in aliens and/or UFO's derives overwhelmingly from media sources, according to respondents:

*Robert [SS: I]: You see these programmes and you see ones that really do look real.*

*Stephen [SS: I]: Just different subjects that have been on the telly about certain facts . . . Just with all the reports you hear, alien findings, that swayed me in the direction*

*Grant [SS: I]: That interests me, that type of thing. So I think if there's so many stars out there, there must be something else. We can't be the only ones. Evolution again, evolution in other planets . . . it might just be plants or something. It might be another race. Aliens.*

*Fiona [SS: I]: I believe in UFO's to a certain extent.*

*Sean [PRS: I]: I always believed in something else, but I was out one night and seen a UFO, me and my mate . . . and it was just such a strange experience to know that was not human.*

*Peter [WF: I]: UFO sightings, yeah . . . if there's life on other planets then they've probably had a look and probably not communicated [with us] because they know we are not at their level of evolution that would be worth their while.*

Salen argues that belief in aliens is due to a combination of two primary factors: human success in space exploration which suggests other life possibilities, and science fiction disseminated through television (1997:122). Both of these are implied in respondent accounts, particularly the latter. Christian respondents on the other hand were less inclined towards belief in visiting aliens.

One Christian respondent professed belief in aliens, sanctioned by the ubiquitous creative powers of God:

*Jane [MC: I]: I suppose you could say if God created life on this planet, He could do it on other planets as well.*

Christians who do not believe in aliens or UFO's explain their disbelief with Biblical disclaimers, for example:

*[EC: FG]*

*Jill: With life on other planets, in the Bible it says God only created life on earth, even though He created all the other ones, He only put life on our planet . . .*

Not all respondents expressed belief in UFO's and aliens. Moreover, there was no clear evidence of a correlation between beliefs in aliens and self-defined religiosity (spiritual or religious). Pippa and Dan were the only respondents who remain entirely convinced that these beliefs are fabrications, in contrast to the Science Studies group in which the majority are believers:

*Pippa [WF: I] They're just like people hallucinating. Satellites in the sky. Attention seeking. I guess people sometimes believe things, it's like paranoia . . .*

*Dan [RS: I]: You look at all these people who saw UFO's, they're a bit weird . . . It's like, they see an aeroplane, they think it's a UFO.*

Salzer's research on UFO cults in America suggests that amongst Christian believers two types can be distinguished: those who view aliens as demonic (invoking a Christian frame of reference) and those who are less clear, viewing such phenomena as supernatural (1997:122-123). Further that, belief in extra-terrestrials may represent

an effort at enchantment in an increasingly postmodern world, one of many efforts to rescue decentred selves by proclaiming that the universe, after all, is not indifferent to us . . . [Moreover] in the imaginations of those persons who are open to such stories . . . [is where] the truly empowered are empowered (Salen, 1997: 149).

Belief in aliens and/or UFO's is held most stringently by the SS group, particularly the males. In part, this may be because such phenomena are often considered as pseudo-scientific, enhancing the credibility and trust of accounts (Sparks, 1998:285). Sparks suggests

one reason why students may not be so quick to dismiss claims of the existence of UFO's and space aliens is because they witness these claims being taken seriously by what many would call our most trustworthy media sources (1998:286).

Perhaps not surprisingly, these beliefs are weakest amongst the Christians, clashing with their interpretations of creation and pointing to the hidden hand of Satan. Belief in UFO's and aliens imputes a clear link to notions of uncertainty associated with modernity, whether this is through scientific mistakes or ignorance, or religiosity. That is, the idea that there might be something 'out there' beyond control and understanding, and further that this might constitute a threat. The world may have been colonised, but space remains beyond the reach of humanity, possibly populated by an unidentified other.

#### **6.6iv            Life after Death**

There is no greater indication of the discontinuity between the religious life of the post-modern West and that of medieval and early modern Europe than in their visions of the afterlife, and particularly of hell (Almond, 1992:297).

Giddens argues that the sequestration of experience has occurred in late modernity. This includes death. He explains that death is routinely hidden from view and has become a technical matter. Moreover, "death remains the great extrinsic factor of human existence; it cannot be brought within the internally referential systems of modernity" (1991:162). The sequestration process helps to secure the maintenance of feelings of ontological security. However, the frontiers of sequestered experience are often contradictory and can actually enhance existential sensibilities because the experience of death is mediated.

This stance invites criticism. The media for example, mediate death in both fictional and non-fictional terms, but these images of death invade consciousness as people are confronted with the issue of their own and others' death. In the context of beliefs associated with post-death, this might well be the contemplation of the event of personal death and the post-event, that is, what happens next, regardless of whether people consider themselves religious. In this respect, contrary to Giddens, it may well be that individuals contemplate death and an afterlife to a greater extent than he allows. Despite the fact that in the western world many people die 'privately' in institutions, the experience is not entirely one of sequestration.

Walter (1996) argues along a similar vein to Giddens, but attempts to explain why many modern people continue to hold beliefs in life after death. Beliefs in the afterlife have become hidden from view rather than disappeared. There are several criticisms regarding his work, however. Walter maintains that most people who hold beliefs in an afterlife have had an experience, mystical or religious. But, there is no attempt to explain where these beliefs come from. Secondly, gender and age are not explored in relation to the types of beliefs held, despite the fact that other research already mentioned, cites these variables as playing an important part in determining the content and extent of an individual's religiosity. More positively however, Walter's work presents a picture of historical changes in beliefs in life after death, suggesting primarily that belief in heaven and hell have become eclipsed by the secularisation of death.<sup>134</sup> Modern accounts of life after death fall into six categories, Walter argues, perspectives informed by both Christianity and eastern religions.<sup>135</sup> Walter's categories can be collapsed into secularism, Eastern Religions, and Western religions (1996:pp. 9-11). The favourable attitude towards 'eastern' religions has already been noted in this thesis.

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<sup>134</sup>In pre-modern and industrial society, the idea of heaven and hell as post-death rewards or punishment were widespread. The idea of Purgatory emerged in the Middle Ages, though this belief declined amongst Protestants in the wake of Luther's reforms. As to the existence of hell, the concept underwent a gradual rejection, peaking in the late nineteenth century. Belief in everlasting punishment was considered incompatible with God's love, a position explained by the modern theologian John Hick (See Walter, 1996: pp. 17-19).

<sup>135</sup> See also Davies *et al* (1991) *Church and Religion in Rural England*.

Modern surveys indicate that belief in hell is not held widely amongst Christians. Walter provides examples that suggest three remaining contemporary teachings about heaven and hell prevail amongst Christians. Amid these perspectives, some branches of Evangelicals have adhered to the belief in hell most stringently. Walter suggests that in Britain, talk about the literal existence of hell is more likely to resonate “from ministers in the Western highlands and Islands of Scotland” (1996:23). However, data from Scotland’s capital presented herein shows evidence of literal belief in hell from Evangelical Christians interviewed, evoked during discussion about their concerns and worries in life.

### **Christian Beliefs in Life After Death**

*[EC: FG]*

*Marie: I remember once we were in P.E. and this subject about dying and where you went came up, and somebody asked me and she went, ‘do you think when I die, I’ll go to hell then, is that what you think?’ I was like, yeah well [laughter] and they’re like shocked [saying] ‘I’m not a bad person!’. And it’s a hard thing to explain to people or what you believe in, I think.*

*Jill: . . . [when you die] they judge you when, well not judge you, but make you account for everything that you’ve done wrong, and I think that I can’t remember half the stuff I’ve done.*

*Marie: . . . it really scares me cause like, it’s always at the back of my mind, am I really like, a Christian? I’m always like that and then . . . I compare myself with other people . . . and I’ll be like, no, and I start thinking about dying, I mean it REALLY DOES SCARE ME, because I remember having dreams about death and that there’s always a, when I’m about to die . . . it’s just the fact that I don’t know.*

*Jill: . . . we believe there is a God and we’ve always got this fear that if you don’t go to heaven you’ll definitely go to hell . . . it would almost be ok if there was no God and then you could just die and you wouldn’t know anything after that, you know,*

*you just wouldn't exist any more, but the fact that you know, we believe there is a God, is that you've always got this fear that if you don't go to heaven you'll definitely go to hell, and you've heard so many horror stories*

The Evangelical Christians were particularly apprehensive about the prospect of going to hell. There was no evidence of this concern in the MC group by contrast. They talked about death in a pragmatic tone

*Rachael [MC:INT]: It's not quite as simple as when you die you go to heaven or hell, that happens when God ends time. At the moment, humans live on a time scale. God doesn't, so there's like two separate worlds . . . when you die you go out of time . . . and then when God ends time as we know it, it will all just push together and people will be allotted where they can go.*

## **Non-Christian Beliefs in Life After Death**

Non-Christian beliefs in life after death are common and in some cases complicated. Most were unsure about heaven, based on the questionnaire responses, but when questioned in interviews described heaven as an imaginary ideal place. There was no mention of rewards or punishment in the afterlife, associated with the concepts traditionally.

*Grant [SS: I]: I suppose we could go into something else after life. Just ghosts or something . . . or maybe chemicals floating around the place . . . I'm not sure about heaven exactly . . . I'm not sure. I always felt there would be something else, but not like heaven.*

*Stephen [SS: I]: I think you only have the one life. But there must be another purpose, you can't just die and that's it.*



*Peter [WF: I]: I think that if you die you might come back as a ghost or you might be reborn either higher or lower or equal status to what you were . . . As soon as you die, whatever is born next of the highest status, if more than one thing is born, which is pretty likely in the same second or minute, then you jump into that higher status being, which could be a human or could be a slug. Or it could be a little bit of bacteria.*

Peter's beliefs bear similarity to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. Peter differs however, because he explicitly rejects the notion of karma, similar to other respondents who do not mention punishment and rewards associated with their beliefs in life after death. However, amongst the WF group, there is belief in what they term – 'what goes around, comes around'. This is the belief that people are punished for their wrongdoings whilst they are mortal, a present-time karmic punishment. The inverse was not mentioned, such as reward for good actions.

[WF: FG]

*Michael: I think if you do a particularly bad thing then something bad will happen to you . . . You know what goes around comes around.*

*Catherine: I think you get punished if you do something really bad, like kill someone and get away with it, I like to think you'll get punished eventually . . . Just like it comes round, it gets back to you . . . If someone does something bad to me then something bad happens to them.*

Dan explained that he is a nominal Muslim, though his belief in an afterlife deviates from mainstream Islamic interpretations, as paradise for the righteous, for example. He had also claimed some affinity with Buddhism, which might help to explain his pick'n'mix beliefs.

*Dan [RS: I]: . . . If you die, your body just stays here, but I think there's something else too, your mind, your conscience . . . I don't think it goes to heaven or hell, but, I think we have some different realm of existence.*

Other comments about beliefs in life after death varied. What they have in common however, is a sense of injustice at the cessation of life

*[WF: FG]*

*Peter: . . . there must be something inside you, that is kind of like a force, that when you die must escape in some way.*

*Michael: Where does it go?*

*Catherine: Heaven hopefully.*

*Peter: . . . your own personal thing or spirit goes wherever you want it to go.*

*[RS: FG]*

*Jude: I believe in life after death.*

*INT: But you don't believe in God?*

*Jude: Not really . . . You get all these people that are regressed [regression hypnotherapy] and they say I was such and such, in such and such a place and at such a time, and you can go through the records and find these people.*

*David: Scientists are talking about genetic memories, like memories being passed down through generations, and I think that would be as good an explanation as any.*

*Jane: . . . I suppose when you talk about death that's when you think about the purpose in life cause if people only live, say a hundred years at the most. Maybe longer, then, out of all the years that pass you've got a tiny wee life span in amongst all that, then it kind of makes you think that there **MUST** be some point to it . . .*

*[SS: FG]*

*Kerry: You know a lot of people have different beliefs about death, but nobody really knows, what death, is . . . I just keep thinking that there has to be a point to it all, and if I keep going I'll find it eventually, and in the meantime, keep myself and everyone else as happy as possible . . . It may be when I'm alive, it may be something to do with death.*

*Esther: That's what I think as well, there's got to be something. . .*

*Kerry: We can't all just be, here for NOTHING.*

*Tom: Everyone's here for a different reason . . .*

*Kerry: Just think . . . it might not even be when we're alive or, millions of years in the future or whatever, but even humanity, as a whole or just like everything on this planet, or the universe, has to be working towards SOMETHING, there has to be some goal.*

Pippa did not claim to be superstitious, religious or spiritual, and did not believe in any aspect of transcendence. Her views on life after death continued in the same vein:

*Pippa: Everything has to end, and because, we can't just be floating around forever doing nothing, we would be so over-populated, whatever world you go on to. It would be so silly . . . I know it's really difficult to imagine the world without yourself.*

Surveys such as the *European Values Survey* (1992) show a correlation between belief in God and belief in an afterlife. Similarly, the respondents in this study who professed belief in a supernatural power or God, were most likely to affirm a belief in life after death. In Britain, more people believe in life after death than in a personal God, and few believe in heaven or hell (53% and 25% respectively). Moreover, the dominant contemporary belief, elicited from interviews, is of an immortal soul (*ibid.*).

According to Haroldsson's multi-national survey (1985), younger adults are more likely to express belief in reincarnation compared to other age groups. However, images evoked by this term were not explored.<sup>136</sup> More women than men report belief in reincarnation, though beliefs in life after death encompass a wider breadth than merely reincarnation. Heaven has been discussed in the chapter on religion, as something that most respondents believed in when they were younger as a reward for good behaviour, and the function it assumes as a comforting concept. Christian respondents had difficulty articulating this and there was considerable concern, particularly amongst the Evangelicals, that they might not have been good enough to go there.

Many western people who believe in reincarnation seem content to adhere to the notion of reincarnation as a private belief and have no attachment to New Age religion (Walter and Waterhouse, 1999). Religious beliefs have become an issue of personal choice, a trend noted earlier by Berger (1969). We see this in the beliefs discussed above.

Gill (1998) has produced a synthesis of British studies on religious belief, attempting to address whether and in which areas there has been decline. The surveys used range from the 1930's to present day, incorporating many measures of religiosity, some of which can be considered as common religion. The conclusion interprets the data as suggesting that worldviews suffused by a transcendent referent continue to be popular, in contrast to the more specific decline in traditional Christian beliefs, a finding confirmed in this study. Whilst quantitative approaches can obscure meanings, overall there have been relatively few studies undertaken to explore these beliefs in Britain – “national social survey questions on religious belief in Britain are irregular, unsystematic, and the results sometimes remain unpublished or difficult to find” (Gill *et al*, 1998: 507). Notwithstanding, however, the surveys strongly suggest a decline of religious belief in line with secularisation theories. Gill places the figure assenting to belief in an afterlife at 37%, whilst disbelief has doubled since the 1940's. The level of disbelief rose abruptly in the 1960's and 1970's. Disbelief in Christian concepts such as heaven has risen by over a third since the 1970's. Interestingly, belief in hell and the devil has declined even more (Gill, 1998:511).

Even less data has been collected about non-traditional beliefs (non-Christian) than Christian beliefs. The data that exists shows some fit with common religion, though Gill oscillates arbitrarily between this term and Hornsby-Smith's (1991) customary religion. Belief in reincarnation for example, utilising British Gallup data shows an increase over the last thirty year, from 18% to 26% (Gill, 1998: 512).

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<sup>136</sup> The figures are as follows: 16-34 year olds – 38%; 35-64 – 28%; 65+ - 22% (Source: Haroldsson, 1985: 147).

Hempton (1988) used the term 'popular religion' discursively, though refers to the same phenomena as Towler (1973). Hempton provides historical evidence to show that across Britain there has been a wide array of constantly shifting beliefs and practices of both an individual and communal nature, varying according to period and region. Historically he argues, this type of religiosity has received little attention, particularly popular urban religion:

So peripheral is religion alleged to have been in the lives of working class Britons, outside the regional exceptions . . . that some historians have virtually ignored it altogether in their descriptions of popular life before the First World War (1988:193).

The situation has altered little, though Hempton adds that all types of religiosity have declined significantly in the twentieth century. Other research however, using different measures of religiosity, such as belief in psychic phenomena, concludes the inverse. For example, one broad multi-national study of psychic phenomena indicates that throughout the US and most countries in Western Europe, a high percentage report a personal psychic experience, with over half of the respondents in Britain and the US responding affirmatively to this (Haroldsson, 1985:145). These surveys indicate that belief in psychic phenomena is widespread. Types of experiences reported are contact with the dead; premonitions, psychic healing; and out of body experiences. However, these surveys do not reveal how respondents interpreted the terms presented; only that 64% of British respondents reported at least one psychic phenomenon (1985:153).

The beliefs in this category refer to a broad range of phenomena, and the media certainly seems implicated in sustaining these beliefs imbuing so-called professional practitioners with authority and trust, as well as allowing a considerable amount of space to such topics. These beliefs also appear to be initiated in part, by personal experiences construed variously as paranormal. The beliefs differ from Wolffe's preceding two categories in so far as they can actually represent a large component of an individual's worldview and offer more detailed explanations about such issues as 'who am I' and 'where am I going'? Unlike the preceding categories where acting spontaneously if a black cat is encountered, some individuals (and the numbers are

large) will more consciously contemplate such issues as life after death, karma and morality, as well as taking the conscious action of consulting a psychic or horoscope. By contrast, an individual does not tend to seek out a black cat so that it will cross their path and confer luck. Crucially, in the two categories above, the phenomena comes to the individual and is then interpreted within a particular framework (a further reason for the categories to be collapsed), whereas in this third category, the individual may actively seek an encounter with the apparent phenomena.

## **6.6 Religious Experience**

Wolffe's fourth category of common religion incorporates religious experiences. Since this has been reported extensively within the chapter on spirituality, it has not been repeated here. Wolffe claims that most people in this category interpret the experience in Christian terms, for example, translating the presence as God or Jesus, though this thesis does not suggest this. Instead, explanations are linked to notions of a supernatural power, which may arguably share similarities to the concept of God. The data suggests, however, a firm correlation between being spiritual and having allegedly experienced the transcendent.

## **6.7 How Common is Common Religion?**

Common religion refers to varieties of non-orthodox religiosity, narrower than both Luckmann's invisible religion (1967), and Bailey's all-encompassing implicit religion (1983) and is therefore, more useful as an organising category of religiosity. For these authors, every aspect of life, especially what we might normally consider mundane, is entwined with religious implication and meaning. The problem here however, is that it becomes very difficult to study religiosity when the boundaries are so permeable.



The beliefs and practices of common religion are engaged in voluntarily, compared to the involuntary element detected amongst respondents' interpretation of mainstream religion (as something individuals are manipulated into). This voluntaristic attribute is considered important to respondents. Religion, like other spheres, is something that people ought to be allowed to choose: what to believe in, whether to engage in any practices, and whether to join a more formal religious organisation and whether to keep beliefs private. Towler and Chamberlain (1973) likewise established that their respondents valued individual choice as essential to their expressions of religiosity.

One function of common religion is as a cultural resource Beckford (1989) – something that may be utilised during times of crisis and to make sense of existence. For example, exam rituals and pondering the meaning of life illustrated above. Whilst Hornsby-Smith (1985) draws similar conclusions to Towler in terms of identifying a multiplicity of religious beliefs, he claims to offer more clarity than the non-orthodox definition proposed by Towler, insisting that magic and superstition should not be categorised alongside beliefs and practices with links to institutional religion.

Instead, 'customary religion' is proposed, which "consists of those beliefs and practises which are derived from official religion but which are not subject to continued control by the churches" (1985:247). He is keen to disaggregate what he considers superstitious beliefs from those of more orthodox origins. It is the former, he maintains, that ought to be classified as common religion. Hornsby-Smith's main criticism is that insufficient credit is accorded to the institutional effect upon beliefs and behaviours.

It is not clear though, how to distinguish which particular beliefs have 'tenuous links with institutional religion' and which do not. Indeed, Davie suggests that "almost everyone's religious views contain elements of both conventional orthodoxy and common religion" (1997:57). Certainly, historical sources suggest the fusion of folk-



type or superstitious beliefs with whatever model of religion happened to be in ascendancy.

Many children continue to be subjected to varying levels of churching as demonstrated, so it is difficult to gauge the point at which religious beliefs and practices are learnt *prior to* institutional involvement. It is even less clear how to decide and measure the content of superstitious and magical belief in distinction to 'customary religion' with orthodox origins. To do so, is to make judgements of inclusion/exclusion and superiority/inferiority. This is not a new issue; since non-orthodox religiosity has always been a rival to mainstream Christianity(ies), perhaps increasingly so as people drift away from mainstream belief *en masse*.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, surveys reveal a broad range of beliefs held in conjunction with Christianity amongst the British throughout the twentieth century.

For instance, *Puzzled People* (1948) illustrated an eclectic range of beliefs, the high incidence of personal prayer, and belief in God. Abercrombie's (1968) study of Islington echoed similar findings:

[R]eligious belief, when not associated with active membership of a church, tends to be associated with superstitious belief while church attendance tends to be antithetical to superstition. Moreover, we have some evidence that for those people who do not go to church yet say they are religious and pray often, religious belief has moved quite far from the orthodox church position and is really much closer to what would normally be called superstition (1970:124).

Whilst expressions of religiosity embedded in more structured forms such as New Age and Neo-Paganism can be said to represent "a response to a dissatisfaction with more orthodox religious institutions to meet the challenges of growing impersonalization in our increasingly bureaucratic society" (York, 1995:2), common religion may be more than this - a residual category that has always existed in

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<sup>137</sup> Historically, churches have considered non-orthodox religiosity variously, as threatening, and at times accommodating certain aspects within the mainstream. Evidence supporting this claim is strong and persuasive. Modern studies depict the existence of a wide range of religious beliefs throughout British society (Mass Observation (1947); Gorer (1965); Abercrombie (1970); Martin and Pluck (1977); Thomas (1973); Hay (1982); Wolffe (1993).

conjunction with more orthodox versions.<sup>138</sup> It represents the background noise of religiosity, emanating from common culture, currently ebbing between the social, moral and psychological vacuums left by the institutional arbiters of religiosity, as well as from the failure of science to provide definitive accounts of phenomenal occurrences.<sup>139</sup> Lacking large-scale ceremonial liturgy and dogma, this relative unboundedness allows some creativity and individuation in sustaining itself from the pools of culture from which it both adds and is drawn.

Recognising the range and breadth of non-orthodox religiosity as common religion, confers attention to a distinction between public and private representations of religiosity. The public face represents the voice and authority of officialdom. Public representations of religiosity make their presence felt and can be observed in buildings, gestures, norms, symbols and rituals which stake a claim to ultimate significance and authenticity. Correspondingly, narratives on the decline or the persistence of religiosity, have been shaped by specifically hegemonic religious ideas. The British public face of religion is in decline, but private individual religiosity does not appear to be declining in tandem. The content of the private sphere is grey: obscure, unknown, and largely unaccounted for. Consequently, it may not be felt to exist in any large measure. What *is* to count as religion is that which has emanated from the white, middle class, and male voice. This maleness is increasingly exposed and challenged. For instance, some feminist theologians express sentiments similar to what follows, discord directed against the historical patriarchy and androcentricity of the church:

Androcentrism or androcentric dualism is to be understood as a world-construction in language. It indicates a framework, mindset or ideology that

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<sup>138</sup> F. Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* (1973) demonstrates that in the nineteenth century many inhabitants of a particular rural community considered themselves Church of England as well as incorporating tales of ghosts and folk tales into their worldview. See also Obelkevich's study of a region of Lincolnshire (1976) and S. J. Connolly's study of rural Ireland. Both reveal popular superstitious beliefs alongside the official models. See also D. Clark (1982) on religion in a North Yorkshire fishing village.

<sup>139</sup> See D. Hay (1980) who argues that there is evidence indicative of religious practice amongst Neanderthals (97). He writes that religious awareness is natural to the human species and that, "the necessity to make sense of existence at an ultimate level, to get in touch with the presumed sacred functions of reality, seems to be the concern of at least some people in any large community of the species *homo sapiens*" (195).

legitimizes patriarchy . . . Feminist thought is labelled extremist, subversive, irrational or abnormal because it seeks to put forward an alternative to patriarchy . . . It demystifies and rejects cultural or religious values of male domination and subordination, which are the very standard of reasonableness, veracity, and knowledge (Fiorenza in Gill, 1995:137-138).

The gendering of religion resonates with non-orthodox religiosity. It could be argued that modern forms of religiosity are feminine in nature in contrast to masculine orthodox versions.<sup>140</sup> There are no hierarchies, no firm beliefs, no corresponding 'system', no presence in public space, and little outward sign of its existence. This religiosity is multitudinous, fluid, creative and less amenable to systematisation and control, residing in the experiential sphere of the self. Accused of being less than rational, of limited meaning and significance at both the level of the individual and the social, private religiosity is largely relegated alongside other lesser claims to transcendence. For example, superstition and magic (Hornsby-Smith, 1985; Bruce, 1996), as women have been traditionally positioned in the shadow of their male counterparts. Indeed, a recent project initiated by the Church of Scotland sought to establish levels of participation in Presbytery meetings explores attitudes towards church structures (Ward, 2000). Gender figures prominently:

For many women, the church is an institution designed by men for men. Its whole way of being and doing is quite distinctively male. The way men do things is often different from the way women do things. As a result, women often feel they do not fit and do not belong. An example of this maleness could be the whole concept of a hierarchical structure of courts, with inflexible job descriptions and job demarcation. Women are uncomfortable working in that way. Women often prefer to work in small groups, and come to decisions by a consensus arrived by talking through ideas rather than by formal, adversarial debate and voting (Ward, 2000:6).

The problem with the above though, is the implication that each gender is naturally suited to a particular way of being (gendering ontology) and doing (gendering epistemology). The solution therefore, is for churches to direct working conditions

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<sup>140</sup> Feminine as in socially constructed ideas of the constituents of femininity. This is emphatically stressed to avoid accusations of essentialism. See Lacquer (1987) 'Orgasm Generation and the politics of Reproductive Biology' on the way in which the female body, her nature and political position have been viewed historically.

towards flexibility and informality, since women are unable to function formally and in hierarchies, being more suited to group work. A more inclusivist suggestion, and a less essentialist proposal, might be to encourage women to participate in the existing structures, rather than accommodating to their supposed nature in the construction of small, informal groups. A reasonable starting point would be to include more women in strategic decision making church courts.<sup>141</sup>

Women's societal marginalization could account in part, for their higher levels of religiosity. For instance, the *European Values Study* (1992) indicates some downward trends in indicators of religiosity, though women remain consistently more religious than men (or at least are more willing to admit to this in the context of the scales used).<sup>142</sup> The 1999 BSA survey confirms this gendered pattern.<sup>143</sup> This presents something of a paradox. Women appear to have higher levels of religiosity, yet are largely invisible within church hierarchies and are reluctant to express their voice. Both factors however, can be attributed to the same cause: women's general marginalization within societal spheres. The resultant alienation fuels feelings of powerlessness and religiosity. The church as an institution is not exempt from societal trends, such as disparity in gender and employment patterns and positions. As these are weighted against women, the trend also feeds into other institutions and societal consciousness about what is natural and unnatural. The church then, remains male dominated like many other British organisational structures, but this should not detract from efforts within churches to address the gender imbalance.

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<sup>141</sup> The Church of Scotland is currently funding a project aimed at addressing gender imbalances within the church structure and hierarchies. Women are objecting to being left out of decision-making processes. They state: "Members of the project group believe that gender attitudes within the church require critical attention. During the course of our discussions it has become evident that such changes as there have been in this respect, over the last decade, have been mainly superficial. Although more women have become ministers and elders, roles and responsibilities of men and women within Church life still tend to reflect traditional assumptions, and attitudes about what can be expected from each (individually and collectively) seem largely unaltered (1998: 23/32:2.1: Church of Scotland Reports).

<sup>142</sup> Measures used were variables such as belief in contact with the dead, psychic healing, precognitive dreams, telepathy and premonitions.

<sup>143</sup> See also Blackmore (1994) 'Are Women More sheepish?' In this article she criticises the notion that women are more likely to believe in paranormal phenomena because they are unintelligent, or poorly educated or emotionally unstable. Furthermore, that it is only in particular areas of belief that gendered differences emerge, for example, superstitions related to social relationships. She suggests females may report greater frequency of so-called paranormal experiences due to their "greater female

Towler maintains that common religion survives because of its capacity to express transcendence and to bestow meaning, imparting a sense of security, "in those situations of life which are characterised by doubt and uncertainty" (155). Moreover

to rule out what may be called common religion as 'mere' superstition is misguidedly to follow the prejudices of the theologian . . . That belief in luck, fate, the influence of the moon or the stars, and so on, can actually make life meaningful to people is so outside their experience that they assume that people who do not accept the beliefs of some variety of intellectually comprehensible official religion must, like themselves, live in a world in which ultimate explanations and ultimate satisfactions are denied them (1974:149-150).

Peer group practises are the primary transmitter of common religion according to Towler,<sup>144</sup> surmising further that these type of beliefs often persist into adult life, though offers no substantive evidence to support this claim. Other studies referred to would seem to support the claim of persistence into adulthood, such as the BSA study (1999), though we can not know for sure what the adult subjects of the studies believed in their youth, nor the extent to which their beliefs have altered and developed.

A central criticism of the peer group practises approach is that locating the inculcation of religiosity primarily within childhood peer groups downplays the issue of their social origin and begs the question, from where did the children acquire these beliefs? The evidence in this thesis suggests mothers' and to a lesser extent other female relatives, are the main transmitters. It could be argued that since most women generally have less power in their lives than most men, (as suggested above), they are more likely to adhere to beliefs and rituals which allow at least a sense of control over particular feelings and situations. The same applies to beliefs held by people with low incomes, also more likely to adhere to forms of less orthodox religiosity according to survey evidence. Additionally, earlier church experiences and Christian

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sensitivity to sounds, greater visual acuity, [which] gives women a far richer, more complicated, and less predictable world in which to live" (1994: 79).

<sup>144</sup> See also Opie and Opie (1959) who similarly argue that cultural beliefs and practises are transmitted primarily amongst children's peer groups.



beliefs mediated by both church and school cannot be ignored as factors which effect subsequent religiosity. The media is also thoroughly implicated in the process of transmitting beliefs, as respondents' highlight.

Common religion constitutes a fairly widespread collection of beliefs and practises, though does not warrant Wolffe's division into four categories, given that his first two exhibit more similarities than differences. Three classifications are sufficient. Whilst females generally tend to report higher levels of religiosity, regardless of measures used, in this thesis gender and belief correlate more in terms of content rather than the extent of beliefs held. It is difficult to present accurate contrasts in terms of age, since studies focus upon adults, and we have no way of knowing how or why these beliefs develop over the range of an individual's life-span.

## **6.8 Conclusion**

It is clear from this study and others, that most respondents, Christian or otherwise believe and engage in an array of practices which we can call common religion, though this is less extensive amongst Christian respondents. Respondents also refer to friends and family who share these beliefs and behaviours.

Towler stresses children's peer groups as the primary transmitter of common religion. This is in contrast to Hornsby-Smith's ambiguous emphasis upon transmission occurring "when there is a breakdown of the process of formal religious socialisation within official religion" (1991: 247). In this thesis it is apparent that many beliefs and practices can quite neatly be described in terms of common religion, though peer groups as transmitters are not explicitly evidenced as primary transmitters. But there is evidence of peer transmission in so far as respondents discuss their beliefs and alleged experiences with friends. However, the family, in particular female members are more often associated with the transmission of such beliefs. Some possible reasons have been considered, such as levels of powerlessness and the greater role (and thereby concern) that women assume in

social relationships. This relates to Gilligan's 'ethic of care' (Gilligan, 1982: 66, 69). The media are also heavily implicated, as are claims of apparently direct personal experience.

It is rather difficult to incorporate the notion of Hornsby-Smith's 'customary religion' to the practising Christians in this study, though undoubtedly some of their beliefs might be considered as emanating from the official church model. It seems too simplistic to contend that the church is responsible for all of their religious beliefs. Respondents, whether Christian or otherwise, are creative social actors, actively constructing and discarding elements of religion in response to the teachings they receive, explored in detail in the following chapter. It should therefore be no surprise that some of them hold heterodox beliefs, though the less committed (i.e. those who deviate most from their church's teachings and doubt the continuation of their future churchgoing behaviour) hold a greater number of such beliefs and practices.

The self-rated non-Christians experienced varying levels of exposure to Christian beliefs through school links to the church, and to a lesser extent Sunday school. Some association is suggested between current beliefs and former beliefs held as Primary School children, such as belief in God and heaven replaced by a less specific belief in a power greater than humanity, and belief in life after death.

The term spiritual/ity has resonance within the context of common religion, since this also shows some relation to beliefs held formerly, and incorporates beliefs associated with common religion, such as religious experiences explored in the previous chapter. Spirituality brings to the fore cogently modern values such as freedom of the individual, particularly in terms of beliefs. In addition, the concept does not imply value judgements regarding superstitious and magical beliefs as worth less than more mainstream religious beliefs. The diversity of religiosity is represented in diagrammatic form in Appendix 6, illustrating different aspects, distinguished as orthodox and non-orthodox, including spirituality from which common religion shares genealogy.



Modern non-church spirituality is an aspect of religiosity and subsumes common religion. Spirituality is an umbrella term that is broader than any of the categories of common religion, since it also incorporates particular attitudes and behaviours as part of an individual's worldview.

Whilst superstitious behaviour, a large component of common religion, is considered problematic behaviour in sociology – outmoded and irrational – or denigrated merely ritualistic, this behaviour supports the argument that individuals possess human agency. So-called superstitious actions “serve to re-affirm the individual's basic commitment to agency and an optimistic, activist intervention in the world” (Campbell, 1995:151). People who engage in these behaviours are attempting to influence their lives in some way. Common religion continues to be a feature of modern societies and modern spiritualities. Moreover, the nature and practice vary over time, as the more modern examples demonstrate. People who partake of these practices do so at times of stress and uncertainty, the more obvious being exams, in an attempt to exert some personal control over their lives.

The positive feature of Towler's category is that it locates religiosity beyond mainstream models. It illustrates the contextual nature of religiosity and shows that this is dynamic and evolving. However, the sub-categories) from the perspective of Wolffe, are largely descriptive and make little attempt to explain the prevalence of such beliefs in modern societies. This chapter has gone some way towards addressing this, and illustrates that some people hold beliefs of a religious nature despite not belonging to church.

## **Chapter 7    Coming Out: Problems with Christian Identity**

### **7.1**

[I]dentity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty (Mercer, 1990:43).

Much of this thesis has been critical of the conflation of religion with Christianity. That is, the taken for granted assumption that Christianity is religion, as opposed to one of its forms. An associated theme that emerged from the interviews was distinct ways of negotiating Christian identity. The general negativity that many respondents expressed towards churches and Christians provides a frame of reference against which Christian identity is worked out. This is most evident in the social setting of school where young people are compelled to spend most of their time. Church experience is also considered as a social sphere that can impact upon both individual and collective identity.

The chapter begins with a general overview of identity, exploring some prominent social theorists with similar and conflicting interpretations. This veers towards a discussion of the data and is completed by consideration of an ethnomethodological approach to understanding identity: both what it is and whether this approach develops earlier sociological attempts to theorise both identity and role theory (Raffel, 1999).

### **7.2. Identity**

Before industrialisation (roughly 1750 onwards) rank and status were ascribed by birth, bounded by religious and legal sanctions. The pervasive worldview in pre-modern Britain was suffused with Christianity (Bruce, 1996).<sup>158</sup> Both individual and social identity lacked the problematics they are currently accorded in sociological dialogue, an area in which many theorists argue that processes of modernisation have

initiated shifting and fragmenting identity dynamics (Taylor, 1989; Laclau, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1992; Handler, 1994). These shifts originate primarily from changes in nineteenth century production and social relations, involving

constant revolutionising of production, [and] uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation . . . All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air . . . (Marx and Engels, 1973: 70).

Although the statement above was originally coined in response to the change from feudalism to capitalism, it continues to resonate with the development of modern capitalist society. Profound changes in production (mode, forces and relations) have altered the stability of an individual's position in society. From a sociological perspective, this corresponding and alleged fluidity of identity is considered either in a negative or positive light: negatively, in so far as the individual self has become fragmented – suggesting a former sense of coherency and wholeness – compelled to seek foundations and a sense of belonging. Alternatively, the plethora of modern identities can be considered to be liberating, allowing seemingly endless choice in the development and fulfilment of lifestyles.

Historically both religion and philosophy, often fused, have been variously concerned with notions of selfhood and identity. In the social sciences, concern with identity can be traced back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed “it is nothing new to be self-conscious about social identity . . . to be uncertain about it, or to assert its importance” (Jenkins, 1996:10). Jenkins argues further that recent preoccupation with identity owes less to a popular sense of shifting social landscapes and more to the “conceits of western modernity” (1996:10). What is new is the obsessive and explicit focus upon *individual* identity in contrast to social identity.

Whilst Jenkins' observations are instructive, the extent and scope of recent changes in modern society have precipitated effects that are qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from any previous historical antecedent. In this sense, identity

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<sup>158</sup> Bruce (1996:4).

representations, both individual and social, have shifted analogously and require explanation. Giddens (1991) represents this view, accentuating the emergence of 'new' mechanisms of self-identity:

modern social life is characterised by profound processes of the reorganisation of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms – mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances (1991: 2).

Giddens insists that the changes he detects have had far reaching effects upon individual and social identities. One outcome is the saturation of society with insecurities, doubt, risk, and crises of personal meaning. Compared to earlier periods, late modernity "breaks down the protective framework of the small community and of tradition, replacing these with much larger, impersonal organisations" (Giddens, 1991:2). Negotiating and sustaining identity has thus become a problematic endeavour from this perspective. Modernity grants benefits, however, since an individual's identity is now far less likely to be conferred by the restrictions of birth.<sup>159</sup> Giddens advances further that, despite problems in identity maintenance and the search for ontological security, individuals now have unprecedented choice at their disposal. Three points can be made in response to this position.

Firstly, Giddens implies that in earlier historical periods, identity was relatively inflexible, generating an unchanging self. This perspective allows him to contrast the seemingly fluid self of modernity with the inchoate self of pre-modern society. Secondly, traditional societies may indeed have provided a protective or moral framework, but life was not a state of zero-risk, regardless of any protective structures.<sup>160</sup> For most people, life was fraught with doubt and life-threatening crises, particularly for labourers relying on the patronage of landowners and on

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<sup>159</sup> Giddens defines modernity as comprising several elements. Modernity is roughly equivalent to the industrialised world, capitalism and the industrialisation of war (1991: pp. 14-16).

<sup>160</sup> Taylor identifies frameworks as providing "the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions, or reactions in any of the three dimensions" (1989:26). These traditional frameworks have been undermined and affect our sense of identity, confusing the issue of knowing who we are and not knowing where we stand on issues of morality and value.

nature itself for their continuing livelihood. Finally, it is an overstatement to assert that choice of identity is both liberative and a reflection of modern reality. Whether considered locally, or globally, most people do not have countless choices at their disposal, particularly in relation to lifestyle. Lifestyle retains its dependence upon economic factors, hence factors such as class and gender remain crucial variables in an individual's identity construction and the degree to which this can be altered.<sup>161</sup>

Much contemporary sociological literature presents identity as central (Giddens, 1991; Gillis, 1994; Bauman, 1996; Craib, 1998). Identity is considered in flexible terms, replacing the rigid centrality of work as one of the key sociological categories of analysis (Rahl, 1988; Bradley, 1996).<sup>162</sup> However, to deduce from changes such as the sophistication of technology that society is now beyond the modern – late modern, post-modern or post-industrial – is an excessive claim. People continue to produce and consume in a profit driven world, albeit driven by expanding technologies. What people *do* continue to influence their personal identity, albeit less conspicuously at the collective level.<sup>163</sup>

Castells' (1997) rejects the salience of class. His contribution towards understanding identity is that former legitimising identities have become dislocated. For example, labour movements, as sources of traditional shared identity are scarce. Whilst it may not be accurate to endorse the view that labour identities have been eradicated to the extent suggested by Castells – his observations being based upon the low level of indices of class struggle at present – some of his more general observations can be extended to Christian identity. Formerly, a major source of shared identity this is

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<sup>161</sup> Despite this criticism, however, Giddens convincingly argues a case for the existence of some qualitatively different types of risks with the potential to impact upon all people, regardless of class and status. He underscores their global implications, and contributes to generating debate over shifts in personal and collective identity, despite disagreement over details.

<sup>162</sup> Rahl discusses the focus on work, the key sociological category, as a materialist preoccupation. He suggests that "not only has work been objectively displaced from its status as a central and self evident fact of life; as a consequence of this objective development, but quite contrary to the official values and legitimisation patterns of this society, work is also forfeiting its subjective role as the central motivating force in the activity of workers" (1998: pp.147-148).

<sup>163</sup> Class continues to be a source of identification for many people, though as Bradley notes: "at the moment class identities are submerged identities, pushed out of sight by others which jostle more urgently for public attention" (1996: 72). But, labour remains an important category and source of identification with others.

indeed in the process of dislocation in many parts of the western world. One outcome is an experience of strain and tension for many Christians in social spheres where living a committed Christian life is no longer the norm.

Castells highlights the increasing power of collective resistance identities across the modern world. Based upon communal principles, these represent a quest for meaning, pursued through the construction of defensive identities in reaction to modern living. These cultural communes of 'network society' (a feature of the information age) are characterised by several features. Crucially, they provide refuge through defensive identities constituted around specific values in reaction to current social trends. Christian fundamentalism for example, is well placed to assume a prominent role in this respect. The New Right in America constitutes a further example. However, one weakness of Castells' argument is the excessive focus upon collective identity, which downplays the issue of individual identity unless this is related to collective movements.

Identity and expressions of selfhood have occupied minds throughout history – from the slave who would revolt if s/he could, and the serf who detests his bonding, to the woman who endures her oppression. Identity is fundamentally about drawing and perceiving boundaries. It is about difference and is therefore not historically unique. Sociological preoccupation with identity is spawned from the pessimistic climate within social theory, provoked by the collapse of 'really-existing' socialism, and the corresponding infiltration of postmodernist theories. Whilst an individual's role in life at the beginning of the twenty-first century is more amenable to movement than in earlier periods, there are still material obstacles confronting most people who attempt to move beyond the strata in which they were born, especially when viewed from a global perspective. Taking this into consideration, commentators who present a view of the reflexive individual, such as Giddens (1991), are paradoxically optimistic and pessimistic. The quantity of choices available to modern individuals are overstated, whilst simultaneous versions of a free-floating rootless individual are presented. This is discussed further towards the end of this chapter.

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Whilst much has been written about minority identities (such as those based around claims of a specific ethnicity, or concerning eastern and newer religions), literature concerning Christianity – particularly as experienced by young people – is deficient. Specifically, the difficulties involved in maintaining an assumedly taken-for-granted identity require some explanation.

One area where identity literature is prominent is youth – a period when identities are most consciously rehearsed (Gilligan, 1993:11). The following section examines aspects of identity negotiation from the perspective of several church-goers within the social spheres of school, family, and the church. In Durkheimian terms, Christianity as a pervasive source of (contentiously) social integration or of *conscience collective* has lost its prominence in directing norms and associated behaviour. The potentially universalistic and liberating narrative of Christianity – formerly more coherent and stable – has been incrementally displaced, more latterly by the disintegration of ideas generally, culminating in experiences of doubt and uncertainty. This includes the theoretical realm in politics and universities, where historical shifts in ideas have created space for postmodernist explanations.<sup>164</sup> Even Giddens appears to argue from this perspective, stressing the continual adaptation of identity in line with personal choice, as though identities can be plucked from social ether.

If, as the opening quote suggests, identity becomes an issue when it is in crisis, then it might be expected that the decline of the Christian narrative will pose problems for its remaining adherents. This is indeed the case as the following will demonstrate, where being a Christian constitutes more of an individual endeavour than a taken-for-granted collective one. That is, it has to be negotiated on a daily basis amongst people who do not share the same faith and beliefs.

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<sup>164</sup> For an outline of Enlightenment ideals and the twentieth century growth of post-modernist discourse see S. Halls' *Contours of Modernity*, especially Chapter 1 (1995).



Negotiating this identity is considered within the sub-text of 'coming out', a term widely associated with public claims about sexuality, where 'coming out' is consciously displayed in distinction to what is accepted as mainstream. Any display risks embarrassment, stigmatisation and in extreme circumstances, exclusionary behaviour from others. The extent to which living in a secularised society impacts upon sustaining a minority Christian identity is explored. Subsequently, the chapter reflects upon some sociological attempts at deconstructing identity and roles, and whether these understandings allow actors a self. For example, Giddens is considered in relation to the notion of the reflexive self and whether his theory of identity allows for the possibility of an actor's commitment to moral frameworks. Raffel (1999), by contrast, aspires towards an alternative approach.

It will be argued that problems in maintaining Christian identity owe less to an alleged decline in religion, and more to the demise of institutional Christianity and the outmoded reputation this has acquired in modern Britain (discussed in Chapter 4). The following section commences with two respondents at ease with their Christian identity amongst friends and peers at school, and moves on to consider the stories of some of their more reticent church attending counterparts.

### **7.3. Proud to be Christian: *'Everyone knows I'm a Christian'***

Thomas (EC) and Rachael (MC) are lifelong churchgoers. The same applies to their immediate and extended family. Both are from relatively affluent backgrounds – Thomas attends a private school, whilst Rachael attends a state comprehensive with a largely 'middle class' intake. Being a committed Christian constitutes their primary identity: internalised, acted upon and giving meaning across all contexts, confirming Castells' notion of a primary identity as, 'self-sustaining across time and space'.<sup>165</sup> Their identity is fundamentally anchored in being Christian; deepening their faith, commitment and Christian understanding, provides a secure foundationalism or moral framework from which their primary identity is forged:

*Rachael [MC: INT]: I think [Christianity] just really makes sense of my life; it gives it a total purpose and explains it all . . . it explains the whole thing . . . God wanted people so he made them and that's why we're here . . . [our purpose] is to love God and for Him to love us; that's how it started out but then it just sort of went wrong . . . I think living for God makes me happy; I think that's the most important thing in my life . . .*

With the examples from Rachael, and Thomas below, something of their Christian identity is revealed in accounts of behaviour with school friends/colleagues, and at church:

*INT: Do you feel you can be more yourself [with other Christians]?*

*Rachael: No, because I act this way all the time . . . I just think I've been really lucky, I seem to have managed to get into a year of school friends that just accept me, and I accept them. I have just been quite lucky like that; some people don't have that experience.*

Christianity no longer represents an overarching narrative; sustaining Christian identity can therefore induce strain during interaction with friends where moral dilemmas are present. Competing notions of right/wrong, good/bad may be counterposed to moral norms associated with living a Christian life. However, in situations where Rachael's Christian identity might conflict with the actions of her friends, she claims to have no difficulty expressing and fulfilling what she believes to be appropriate Christian behaviour:<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Castells (1997) maintains that identities are not singular, but multi-faceted and organised around a primary identity.

<sup>166</sup> The interview had taken place in her comfortable bedroom, freshly decorated and revealing two aspects of Christian signification: a Bible lay on a cabinet opposite her bed with a bookmark edging its way out, and a crucifix hung on her wall. This 'public space' complied with the fact of her friends' knowledge of her religion.

[Discussing drugs]

*Rachael [MC: INT]: Well I wouldn't take them because // I go to church and we believe that you shouldn't really do anything to your body that is going to harm it . . . I think some people have an idea that there's loads of pressure put on people, but there's not really, or there wasn't ever for me. Most of my friends don't have anything to do with them . . .*

At school, many people are aware of her Christian identity:

*Rachael: Everyone knows that I'm a Christian . . . it's just come up / they'll say, 'are you coming out on Sunday morning?', and I'll say, 'no, I'm going to church'. . . Or may be someone else told them, like they were saying something like may be to your friends, they were talking and one would say, 'I don't know anyone who's religious', and they'd say, 'oh, Rachael is', and they wouldn't have realised it before, just everyone knows.*

Heidi attends the same church as Rachel. She talked about the stereotypical images people hold about Christians:

*Heidi [MC: INT]: . . . people get the wrong idea . . . 'do-gooder', and 'dutiful', 'going to church', and sort of going by what the Bible says, and laid out plans, which I suppose is true in a sense, but there's a lot more to it . . . I mean in first and second year you didn't tell people you were Christian because you would get slagged rotten.*

*INT: So when did you 'come out', so to speak?*

*Heidi: I don't know if I'd say 'coming out', because a lot of my friends knew anyway, my closer friends . . . [By fourteen] it wasn't such a huge thing by then, but when you are in first and second year, people slag each other for anything because it's probably a self-esteem thing, it makes them feel big. Everybody does it I think. But then it's funny in our school because we have this total huge diversity thing, sort of everybody's right to their own religion and stuff like that, but then Christianity is different, it's, I don't know [if] it's quite acceptable, like you wouldn't slag Buddhists.*

Rachael and Heidi are accepted amongst school friends regardless of being Christian, though both acknowledged former difficulties and the stereotypical verbal currency about Christians.

Rachael's father is a church Elder at their 'family church'. The church represents an important sphere of support for her beliefs. She described the comfortable way it makes her feel:

*Rachael: Like home, you know what I mean? It is a family because I have been brought up there*

Although Rachael's father plays the role of church Elder, at home he rarely discusses Christianity. It is primarily her mother who sustains the religious focus in the family, a recurring theme across the interviews:

*Rachael: Mum has the routine as well, but she speaks about it and tries to get my brother and sister involved and things; my dad is not quite as open about it, so he obviously is religious but he's probably a bit more private about his religion.*

Rachael and her mother discuss issues about their church such as the sexist hierarchy: active male leaders for example, against the more passive role of women.<sup>167</sup> Though they both disagreed with the gender bias, Rachael sensed greater gender injustice:

*Rachael: They just don't let women be Elders and I think that the women in the church are just too accepting of that – they say, 'right okay, I COULD be an elder, but I'll leave it cause it causes too much trouble' . . . [The minister] had some really ridiculous notion about woman being made from man; and then it was 'WOMAN SINNED FIRST', so therefore men should lead the church! [laughs] But I don't*

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<sup>167</sup> Indeed, during participation at her church, I noticed that without exception men collected the offerings presenting them to the altar. Furthermore, a male Elder always opened the pulpit for the

*agree with that at all . . . Because I feel that he contradicted himself. . . He used to say, give an example of children saying 'He did it first before I did!' and say 'Well that's silly when it comes to sin. It doesn't matter WHO did it first. If you sinned, you sinned'. And then, he'd go to the story of Adam and Eve and say, 'Eve sinned first so she's worse than Adam', which I thought was a bit of a contradiction . . . [My mum] thinks it's a bit unfair but there isn't really much you can do [laughs].*

The issue of one gender leading the church is a moral one, culminating in men occupying an exclusive and privileged position. Both Rachael and her mother's reluctance to challenge the gendered structure may be explained by recourse to Gilligan's formulation of self and morality (1993). Based upon interviews with college students, she found that the desire not to hurt others or enter into conflict was the core of their morality (1993: 64). The stance of non-action from Rachael and her mother accords with the desire not to upset 'the church', a decision informed by

women's reluctance to judge [which] stems rather from their uncertainty about their right to make moral statements, or perhaps from the price for them that such judgement seems to entail. When women feel excluded from direct participation in society [and church], they see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgement made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend and by whose names they are known . . . The essence of moral decision is the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice. To the extent that women perceive themselves as having no choice, they correspondingly excuse themselves from the responsibility that decision entails (Gilligan, 1993: 67).

Rachael values her church for the support and companionship from other Christians and as a place where she can question the Bible. The church conducts a Scripture Class for its younger attendees, time and space away from the adults conveyed in a formal manner. I surveyed this on one occasion, but was informed that my presence would "put them off" their studies. I witnessed minimal interactions between the young people in this context, the class being directed towards Bible explication only. However, I had observed the young people during the main service seated to the far rear of the church, laughing quietly as they passed notes and ate sweets. They

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minister, whilst three additional men (Elders) sat at the front during the sermon. Women prepared and served the tea afterwards

appeared more animated and relaxed in their small group, concealed from the pulpit. Sitting at the far rear balcony avoided any formal/informal surveillance of their behaviour and level of participation, unlike the Scripture Union class in which earnest study of the Bible was the sole aim.

From Rachael's accounts it is obvious that she is enclosed within a system of secure support networks sustaining her Christian identity: from her family (also church-goers), a close Christian friend at school, as well as others that she knows of – friends from church, and the church itself. Though most of her school friends are not Christian, her personal sense and presentation of a primary Christian identity does not elicit concern. It is important, however, that she be accepted at school regardless of her Christian beliefs and norms. She stressed this by emphasising her good fortune at 'being accepted' in this context. Being perceived as 'normal' rather than some Christian stereotype, provides her with a means to acceptability, avoiding judgements of difference.

Thomas, like Rachael, is supported from several angles with his beliefs, belonging to a family who share and encourage his developing Christianity:

*Thomas [MC: INT]: They have been Christians from an early age and both of them were brought up in a Christian background with their parents as well; and they got married in a big church, as Christians and / / I don't know, they've always brought me up with the expectation that I would hopefully become a Christian . . . I don't know how I could have coped without my parents being Christians, and in that I often feel guilty at YF [Youth Fellowship group], when somebody who is coming to it comes out of interest or whatever, and they do not have any other connections than, say, a friend who's bringing them there.*

Thomas' statement about his parents illustrates the importance of family support across time and space. Encouragement has to exceed physical church boundaries. Although he had experienced some bullying at Primary School due to his church-going behaviour, at Secondary School this was less problematic. Like Rachael, he



rarely encountered moral dilemmas amongst friends. He conformed closely to a Christian moral framework; on drugs, for example, an issue that all respondents recorded as high profile at parties:

*[Drugs]*

*Thomas: . . . At Posse [a church group for young people aged 16+] I brought up the point that some of my friends, whilst I was at a party, lit up a joint. And they asked me if I wanted one and I said, 'NO', and they sort of said, 'GO ON!'; and I said, 'NO!', and they realised that I really did mean no and they knew then that I was a Christian . . . Me being there and saying no and them asking me why not, provided a witness, which I, at the end of the night was happy to have the courage to provide . . .*

*[On alcohol]*

*I don't drink to get plastered like everyone else seems to in my school. I drink if I go out with my friends who are going to get plastered . . . In the Bible it says you should not become drunk, and secondly I don't like the idea of being out of control of my body . . . I've been fortunate enough to have presented myself from the beginning as being a Christian, or being amongst Christian people . . . I've not really been in the situation where I've had to tell someone and they'd be surprised . . . I [also] try not to go out with girls who aren't Christian . . .*

He gleaned much support from the church, involved with several of its social groups and experienced little difficulty traversing his Christian identity at school amongst friends and peers. Radiating confidence, he conveyed self-assurance and was often the focal point amongst contemporaries at church.

These examples suggest two respondents content to show something of their Christian identity, at church and in secular school enclaves. Thomas shows this in the example he recalls when confronted by moral dilemmas of action. That is, whether to smoke cannabis and how much alcohol to consume in bars. Thomas refers explicitly to the moral framework of his church and the manner in which this impinges upon the decisions he reaches. Whilst both respondents clearly fulfil the role of churchgoer, they exhibit something beyond what is expected from this role:



they show that they are committed to living their lives according to their understanding of their respective Christian moral frameworks.

However, becoming a Christian (or anything else that one *becomes*) is not merely a result of internalisation, but of reflexive management, understanding and interpretation of received ‘messages’. The process is unremitting. Considered from this perspective, social actors are imbued with a stronger capacity for constructive meaning-making than is allowed by structural approaches of action (Durkheim, for instance) positing actors as passive receptacles. Being Christian, indeed merely *being* and *maintaining* any aspect of identity, is a matter of continuous creative labour.

The preceding examples illustrate some respondents who are able to take context for granted in maintaining Christian identity; they are exemplars of committed young Christians. They have partly internalised, and are partially constructing their personal Christian values in terms of what they consider to be morally acceptable, whilst not diverging too much from the outlook of friends. They are flanked by the church, friends (both school and non-school) and family. One consequence is that their identity is neither problematised nor a neurotic reflexive project. Contrasting examples presented below convey the opposite, detailing respondents’ difficulties in this respect and the salience of context.

#### **7.4 The School**

[O]n entering the social world of the school, children have to acquire, work on and develop another identity – that of schoolchild (cf. James, 1993). Since the interplay of the child at school with the adults and with the social norms of the school will have a different character from these interplay’s at home, and since the adults construct the child differently in the two settings, a child may well construct a separate identity for herself as schoolchild (B. Mayall, 1994:118 ).

Children and young people spend a substantial amount of time at school and are obliged to present some version of their self in a formal classroom environment – as

well as more informally with friends and peers – travelling between lessons, at break times, and during after-school activities. Schooling transmits many societal values and expectations about what the good (and bad) citizen ought to be, mediated via the informal and formal curriculum (Illich, 1973; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Gender roles for example, are relayed through all subjects. History, for instance, seeks to explicate ‘man’s’ great dramas and conquests. Gender roles are similarly conveyed through the way that teachers interact with pupils - the language used, frequency of discussion and responses, and forms of behaviour and demeanour valued from males and females. In addition, pupils’ learn – often in collaboration with parents – that there is a subject hierarchy, that some subjects are valued more highly than others are. The school mediates a sense of dominant societal values and provides a forum for learning about systematic sanctions that can be applied to transgressors. Within these boundaries, pupils learn to manage their school identity. Being Christian then, can entail additional identity concerns within school. Individuals who have already experienced taunting in the latter primary years bring this baggage to Secondary School, both teasers and the teased.

The need to identify and maintain sameness is vital for young people (Griffiths: 1995). This is illustrated for instance, in observing the dress code adopted by different age groups. Even in the absence of a formal school uniform policy, pupils’ dress similarly, adopting current casual high street styles. This sameness or attempt to fit in with others’ reaches beyond bodily adornments and regimes, and is apparent in interactions with others. Seeking sameness, or avoiding difference, is apparent in an individual’s physical presence and *habitus*.<sup>168</sup>

The school is a shifting community where members seek degrees of commonality, in part through dress and demeanour. Indeed “[t]he full definition of someone’s identity . . . usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community” (Taylor, 1989:47) – which is

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<sup>168</sup> Bourdieu defines *habitus* as “the strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations . . . a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (1977:72,95).

something sought by members of a school, in part through dress and demeanour. To Giddens, bodily appearance is increasingly important in sustaining a coherent sense of identity. For example, dress signifies specific gender representation (masculinity/femininity), as well as class. Routinised control of the body is crucial and, “integral to the very nature both of agency and being accepted (trusted) by others as competent” (Giddens, 1991: 56/57). The modern school is a defining community comprised largely of pupils, where each creatively labours to maintain various degrees of sameness, whilst paradoxically attempting to stage some individuality. The following material considers some of the implications for individual identity in refusing to ‘come out’ as a Christian at school.

## 7.5 Fitting-in and Sorting Practices

Whilst a substantial body of research exists on young male culture, the same does not apply to studies of young women’s lives. Griffiths (1995) has attempted to address this imbalance, partly to offset what she calls the ‘gangs of lads model’ spurred by Willis (1977). Moreover she observes, like Gilligan (1993), that “there is a danger in trying to fit girls’ experiences into existing subcultural theory because it may be inadequate to explain young women’s experiences” (1995: 24).<sup>169</sup> Bearing this in mind, it is worth considering whether there is evidence of a problematic Christian identity which might be gender specific.

Thorne observes that

In any mass of students there are many potential strands of ‘aliveness’ and difference that may be used as a basis for constructing groups. Age is the most institutionalised principle of grouping . . . The social categories and identities of the students - religion, social class, race and ethnicity, and gender – provide additional lines of difference that teachers and students evoke verbally and in their sorting practices, but to strikingly varied degrees (1993:32).

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<sup>169</sup> See also Griffin (1980); Davies (1982). Fowler’s *Stages of Faith* (1981) is certainly not immune from such criticisms. In this work he outlines a model identifying faith stages which rest upon the conflation of a ‘universal individual’ with maleness. Women might thereby find particular stages beyond their reach owing to their lack of apparently universal/masculine attributes.

School friendships are characterised by interactive complexities of power dynamics that revolve around issues of sameness and difference. Writing about girls, Kutnick has identified several factors that are important in friendship formation (1988). Griffiths has elaborated these, assigning them to the categories of proximity or nearness, continuity and similarities (1995:27), asserting that girls and their friends “maintained their sameness quite consciously by excluding girls who did not conform to group norms” (1995: 34). This draws attention to some of the difficulties confronted in school amongst Christians, where strain is experienced between assenting to this identity and its associated norms on the one hand, and trying to conform to sameness with friends at school. Some are able to manage this task with more ease than others are.

Jane, for example, chose to conceal her Christian identity during the RS focus group, talking without restraint in the individual interview by contrast:

*Jane: I tend to keep myself to myself. I know what it's like being a Christian and a teenager. Some of my friends that are really close don't even know. But the ones that do know, it doesn't bother them. But who I am, being a Christian, is part of that. If some people found out that I'd gone to church practically all my life they'd be a bit shocked . . . I know what people are like, they'll start judging you and I'd rather they didn't. I could hear them all now – ‘Jane goes to church!’ – I don't think it's worth the hassle. I've enough to worry about with exams and things like that; I don't need the added pressure of people not talking to me . . . Some people probably wouldn't. Others - it wouldn't make a difference . . . Sometimes, I do think ‘what if someone sees me?’. But, I think I've got to the stage, if they do, I 'm not going to hide as I walk into the door, just in case someone sees me. I suppose a lot of people aren't in town at that time of night on a Sunday. / My mum did say to me a few weeks ago, ‘when you go to university are you going to tell people?’/ and I said, ‘probably, yes’. I don't know, why I see uni. different to school, but people are more mature and probably willing to accept it more than school, when you get the nippy people . . . I don't think many of my school friends go to church.*

Martha, quiet and lacking in confidence, attends the same church as Rachael. She discussed conflicting values held amongst friends and her church, and is concerned about others discovering her Christian identity. She attends a large comprehensive school with a reputation of being rather 'rough'. It is in this setting that she has been teased:

*Martha [MC: INT]: I don't think they really bother any more because I just sort of ignored them when they said it, so I think they know but they don't bother. I don't act too much like, you know what I mean, a proper Christian . . . [others] have this vision that it's like, quiet, quiet, sensible and hard working and are really proper and that . . . My school friends, none of them are Christian . . . But I get on better with my [Christian] friends, it's like coming out of that kind of world where you've not got any Christian friends and you feel that in your non-Christian friends you've got a piece of your life missing because church is like a whole different piece. It's like something inside you that's missing and you can't really speak about it all the time. With my Christian friends, I can speak about everything and it's really good.*

Griffiths is instructive at this point, highlighting a distinction between ordinary and confiding talk, both of particular importance to girls' friendships. The latter, she suggests is "characterised by a deeper level of feeling, involving a sharing of emotion and innermost feeling" (1995:66). This seems to be what Martha is referring to when she talks of her Christian friends. Martha suggests (in different terminology than Griffiths), that much of her interaction with non-Christian friends centres around 'ordinary talk'. If it is the case – as Griffiths suggests – that talk is central to teenage girls' friendships, then the fact that Martha feels unable to talk to school friends in any depth, might help explain why she gets a 'hard time' at school sometimes. Her values often conflict with theirs, and she feels unable to engage in 'confiding' talk. Martha claimed that she could speak more freely with her Christian friends.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> A parallel with Jacobsen's (1997) study on religion and ethnicity has resonance here. Jacobsen draws attention to the difficulties that young Asians encounter amongst particular non-Asian friendship groups.

For Martha, being Christian is the main reason she feels only partially accepted by some people at school. Sorting practises such as name-calling and being excluded on the basis of being different represents a concern of most of the church-going Christians. However, sorting practices are not experienced exclusively amongst Christian pupils. The school is a site in which many different sorting practices occur – both between pupils and between pupils and teachers.

One area in which Martha is subject to the surveillance and criticisms of others is sexuality. Both sexes are guilty here, teasing her because she will not indulge in sexual activity. The rationale she uses for abstention is her Christian beliefs – sex before marriage is against Christian teachings:

*Martha [MC: INT]: . . . It gets a bit hard sometimes at school, because people say things to you. They all say things like that . . . 'Bible basher', and 'do you watch Songs of praise?' And, praying at night, just [things] like that . . . I wasn't happy for ages, well not really . . . People go behind my back and say things about me . . . I've had a few relationships, where they're just in it for sex. And I've been dumped over it before. People tell them [I'm Christian]. There's this boy that's started off saying it. He's the one that slags me too. I don't understand him . . . For some reason he tells people that I'm a Christian. Some don't bother, but they still think, because I don't act so much like it, that I'll just let them [have sex], but I won'.*

By contrast, Thomas implies that being both male and Christian is attractive to girls. Empathy is an assumed correlate of Christianity, a value that girls admire. He recently discussed this with a male friend and they had decided that two things can impress girls: firstly, to admit to being Christian, and secondly to claim a love of romantic literature. Thus, whilst Martha's Christian identity placed her at a disadvantage with boys, Thomas experienced the opposite with girls.



Thorne accentuates the importance of dating to teenage culture and the role of third parties in matching and disbanding couples:

By high school, when full-fledged dating becomes prevalent, the collective structure – groups assessing patterns of desire, ranking of desirability and constructing, launching, and dissolving couples – consolidates into a kind of market. Although groups may be less involved in the direct creation and dissolution of couples, they continue to rank desirability and to shape understandings about “how far” a couple should “go” . . . [Moreover] the social position of girls increasingly derives from their romantic relationships with boys, but not vice versa (Thorne, 1993:pp.151-153).

At school, Martha has been categorised as ‘not normal’ on the basis of existing Christian stereotypes. The resultant focus upon difference – often imagined – can lead to undesirable consequences, such as exclusionary practises outlined by Martha. Cohen suggests this as a general problem:

Most of us will occasionally have felt ill-served, even outraged, by having had attitudes imputed to us because we are categorised in certain ways. We feel these impressions of ourselves to be inadequate or inaccurate expressions of the people we believe ourselves to be. Statements of these general kinds are made about ‘students’, ‘Brits’, ‘Prods’ . . . labels which we may well regard as inappropriate descriptions of ourselves, even if we belong to these categories . . . the stereotype is a crude device . . . a mode of generalisation which ignores or neglects the rich diversity among people in a kind of deference to those features which they might be constructed as having in common (Cohen, A. P. 1994: pp. 16-17).

One recent American study attempted to unpack the notion of stereotyped religiously oriented youth (Youniss, 1999). The study was based on school students, found to be far from dull and compliant, as the stereotype suggests. Furthermore, the authors found that “one does not have to give up individuality when entering a social tradition” (1999: 252) such as Christianity. Youniss also argues, like Francis and Kay, that

adolescents engaged in religion are psychosocially healthy. Being religious is important to one’s identity development for two main reasons. First, it has the potential for the discovery of common humanity and the elimination of



difference. Secondly, it integrates individuals into society and frames orientations that give the individual's life a sense of coherency, and grounds norms and principles for behaviour (1999:250).

The problem with this claim is that contemporary religion shows little sign of eliminating difference or stressing common humanity, especially on a global level. Religion is divisive as well as cohesive, as sociologists such as Marx and Weber emphasised last century.

Unlike Thomas, Martha is confronted by moral dilemmas amongst peers. She often capitulates and shows little sign of attempting to influence their actions with her own beliefs (reverse peer pressure):

*[On peer pressure]*

*Martha [MC: INT]: They say, are you coming out drinking or that / I shouldn't really / Even like, you CAN drink when you're a Christian, but you're not supposed to get out of your head. They go, 'have another drink, have another drink'. You're like, 'I shouldn't!' / but you feel really stupid.*

Martha spoke of how she tries to 'fit in' at school. For example, conforming to school culture partly through dress code: altering the uniform to render it fashionable (short skirt), a form of collective school resistance according to Griffiths, and others (McRobbie, 1978; Griffin, 1985). Thorne also highlights the importance of cosmetic culture at school and the powerful symbolic status it confers (1993). Martha complies similarly in this respect, adorned with conspicuous make-up. She consumes alcohol with friends at weekends, an activity concealed down dim side streets or in people's houses; though there is always the fear that her father might find out. The risk is calculated and acted upon because she wants to appear 'normal' and gain peer acceptance.

Martha demonstrates that she has her own thoughts about what acting like a Christian really entails – a persona she feels she does not accomplish. She feels particularly constrained by the Christian moral framework she refers to as 'rules'.

Ross (MC) is equally discerning about exposing his Christian identity at school.

*Ross [MC: INT]: The people that do know are ones that have gone to church with me; well, one friend of mine who also goes to church, or did.*

*INT: What about at school?*

*Ross: Some people will know . . . I wouldn't make a point of telling them, 'hey, I'm a Christian!' . . . In some cases they'd make an issue of it.*

Similarly, Samantha (EC) contrasts sharply with Thomas and Rachael, engaging in strategies to conceal her identification with Christianity. Samantha also provides a contrast to Martha above because she has managed successfully to conceal any church association. My presence drew attention to this on one occasion. A twist of fate brought Samantha and I into contact at her school. Working as a supply teacher in R.M.E. one afternoon, we encountered one another in class, several weeks after she had agreed to participate in this study. The following account reveals something of her horror at the possibility of being 'out-ed' and how she managed to conceal her Christian identity.

Samantha entered the class- room with two other females anticipating a lesson with her regular teacher. Upon seeing me standing beside the desk, and recognising me as the 'researcher' from the church, she stood motionless. Her face beamed crimson and she gestured toward me to keep quiet. Reading this symbol as a request to say nothing of her church-going, the lesson proceeded – a set topic on the Bible as instructed by the class teacher. Asking the class to open the book at Genesis (a feat in itself), there was laughter and bemusement from many pupils who were unaware of its location. Samantha joined in looking sufficiently puzzled. Eventually she 'inadvertently' found it, calling out the page number. In a teasing manner, someone shouted back accusingly – 'how do you know?' I think at this point, she was being implicitly accused of familiarity with the Bible, risky ground to be on. However, she replied promptly and skilfully that as all books have a contents page she had merely looked up Genesis to get the page number. As the lesson progressed and I asked

questions about aspects of Genesis, Samantha remained silent, feigning (I assumed) ignorance in accompaniment with her peers and looking blank as if daydreaming, a familiar device indicating resistance in school (Griffiths, 1995: 91).

She spoke freely in the subsequent individual interview, at ease in her room, a personal space with no obvious Christian signification:

*INT: . . . do your friends know that you are a churchgoer?*

*Samantha [EC: INT]: Some of them, not most of them. Like, some really close friends do. I think actually, some folk may be know from Primary School, because like, I wasn't bothered in Primary one upwards until I went to primary five or something, like, so if they remembered they'd know, but I've never mentioned it again.*

Feelings of peer pressure and concern about self-presentation affect both genders. Ross [MC] attends the same school as Martha and confirmed feelings of pressure from peers, somewhat different to that experienced by Martha. This came in the form of 'laddish' random assaults in public places:

*Ross [MC: INT]: Yes, you definitely do [feel peer pressure] . . . to annoy other people on the street, chucking stones at them, that sort of thing. I wouldn't probably do it / it depends who it was to, but probably not.*

Simon (EC) recounted similar tales in which he and his friends destroyed street furniture and fought other groups of young males. There does indeed seem to be evidence of gender specific peer pressure to engage in particular types of activities, discouraged by Christianity, if not wider society. Girls are far less likely to be persuaded into disruptive street behaviour. They are more likely to suffer from peer pressure on the basis of non-conformity to expectations around sexual encounters and relationships, a finding also accentuated by Griffiths (1995). However, it is unlikely that only Christian females are confronted by these peer expectations since these represent ritualistic components of youth culture generally.

Drugs and alcohol, for instance, are encountered at school regardless of gender or religion. Only Thomas referred explicitly to his Christian moral framework as the rationale for self-moderation or abstention. Most others experienced peer pressure in these spheres, as did the non-Christian respondents.<sup>171</sup> Heidi's talked about cannabis with a matter of fact attitude:

*Heidi [MC: INT]: . . . I've got friends that have taken hash . . . especially in Ferguson High, it's 'hash country' you know, it's so easy to get. Half their parents grow it [laughs] . . . it is passed round [at parties but] . . . it's just who wants to and it's not this big thing really . . . It's just like cigarettes, hash has obviously been offered to me but you just, I don't know, you just say, 'no, it's all right, I'm fine', and that's it . . . I've drunk alcohol but usually my friends who are over age buy it, but that's not very Christian you know what I mean?*

Unlike Rachael, Heidi and Thomas, Steve (MC) sometimes acted contrary to general Christian values in the company of friends, challenged by moral dilemmas.

*Steve [MC: INT]: I've tried cannabis, but I was only really FORCED to do that and I didn't like it . . . I was confronted by a friend and I was curious, so I decided to take it . . . I'm a pretty bad Christian . . . I do things that I know are wrong . . . drinking, and disobeying my mum and dad and not really thinking twice about it / and swearing.*

*INT: So what would be a good Christian then?*

*Steve: I think someone who stuck by what the Bible says and is moral [and] wouldn't do anything that might be controversial, and stick by their beliefs . . . I stick by them, but I sometimes violate them / . . . just being around other people that do the same*

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<sup>171</sup> Drugs and alcohol have long been a taken-for-granted aspect of teenage and young people's cultures, negotiated according to an individual's personal moral framework against that of peers. Over two decades earlier, Willis (1977) noted that drinking and smoking (including cannabis at parties), represents a large part of masculine school culture. It is in the latter area that some of the Christians are placed in dilemmas with their peers. Whilst it seemed reasonably acceptable amongst all respondents to consume alcohol, this was distinctly less so with illegal drugs such as cannabis.

*things . . . you just copy everyone else, and it just happens . . . I think I would be more rebellious if I was a non-Christian [because] then I think my life wouldn't have much point.*

Steve then, has fewer support networks than Thomas and Rachael for example, and is less certain about acting upon Christian beliefs when interacting with friends. In recognising this, his dialogue shows a concern to delineate the 'good Christian' in contrast to the perception he holds about his self. His Christian identity is not his primary identity when he is with school friends, but seemed more so at home. Here he can talk about it at will, especially through responding to his mother's interpolations and sharing in her spiritual experiences (see Chapter 5). Being Christian confers existential meaning to his life, but also evokes internal tension in the company of friends.

Committed Christians are a minority in the school environment. The Christian *nomos* is fragile, periodically challenged implicitly or explicitly by non-Christians (for example, the WF had talked earlier about questioning Christian friends and acquaintances – Chapter 4). Pupils attempt constantly to appear 'normal' and maintain a coherent sense of identity in their demeanour, regardless of context.

In Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977), opposition to authority across school culture is explored. This occurs most aggressively by a group of males described as 'the lads'. Perceived conformists become targets for others such as 'the lads', hence the construction of a group clearly inimical to themselves – 'the ear'oles'. Perceptions of Christians within the school context shares proximity with Willis' representation of 'the ear'oles' as passive receptacles. In Willis' work, 'the ear'oles' like the Christians, are imagined as lacking fun (1977:14). This is one of the central criticisms from non-Christians against Christians – the idea that they passively accept church prescriptions and limitations on their behaviour (see Chapter 4).

David has problems with his religious identity at school, though is able to discuss his

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beliefs at home with parents; mostly his mother who sustains the dynamic of the family's beliefs and practices. They attend the local Kingdom Hall together. He spoke about his friends and his identity as a Jehovah's Witness:

*David [RS: INT]: I've got my friends from school mostly and I just pal about with them. I tend to keep myself to myself / I just sort of go and come away again.*

*INT: So they don't know, your non-Christian friends?*

*David: No, they don't know.*

*INT: [referring to questionnaire] Because you 'don't want to be treated any differently', it says here. How do you think they'd react?*

*David: . . . I don't know, with some of them it might not make the slightest difference. I think I'd get a hard time, well no' a hard time / I'd get all the abuse thrown at me . . . I'd just prefer not to, although I don't think I'd sort of deny it, I don't think // I don't know, it's kind of, I mean, if they were to say to me, 'what do you believe?' and all that, you know [Some people have] been open from the start and now it's accepted, and I wish I'd done it that way / it would relieve, it would take a lot of pressure off me if everyone knew what I was and what I believed . . . I wish it was out in the open, but to make the first step and tell, you know, what I believe and where I'm heading, what sort of direction I'm heading, it's the hardest part. I think once I've done it, it will probably make it easier for myself because it's kind of like, hiding. Hiding everything away and I shouldn't really . . . Being revealed as that, I suppose that's been constantly sort of a problem . . . Once when I was going to the Kingdom Hall, someone from school saw me going in. He was sort of one of the bullies. I thought he'd say something, but he never did.*

Tension experienced by Christians across secularised social settings is prompted by the relative inertia of Christianity in modern Britain, compelling church-goers to bracket their Christian identity outwith church and home. Some church-going respondents were inclined towards concealing the Christian aspects of their identity in specific contexts, since this may act as a trigger for exclusion in some cases. Martha for example, who had spoken about boys at school refusing to go out with



her because they assume a dull Christian stereotype: an unwillingness to engage in sexual relations.

The cases above illustrate that despite having internalised some of the church and home norms on Christianity, respondents are also capable of agency and creativity, pushing Christian norms beyond their fixed boundaries. The under-age consumption of alcohol is acceptable to varying degrees for example, despite the knowledge and fear of church and parental disapproval. This behaviour is 'normal' amongst peer groups, and partly in an effort to avoid exclusion it is often simpler and less controversial to join in with the behaviour.

The reticence at 'coming out' as a committed church-going Christian motivates some individuals to act as skilled 'cultural navigators' (Ballard, 1994). They are compelled to shift between the secular mileaux of their peers – to negotiation and engagement with the rituals and dogma of the church community – where different norms apply and different identities are creatively constructed and reconstructed. In examining Rachael, Thomas' and Steve's spheres of action, factors that appear to impact upon their Christian identity are highlighted. These spheres are examined in more detail below, drawing upon further accounts of some Christian respondents who expressed difficulty maintaining their Christian identity, and their attempts at resolution.

## **7.6 School Ethos and R.M.E: 'Everyone mucked about'**

Schools represent a further social sphere with the capacity to affect perceptions of religion. Francis and Kay (1996) found that in Secondary church schools the effect on Christianity is neither positive nor negative, whereas Catholic schools appear to exert a positive effect. In addition, Primary schools generally exert a negative influence<sup>172</sup> (1996: 49). The negative attitude is illustrated in the finding that school

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<sup>172</sup> This finding contrasts with the thesis, in which most pupils recall a fairly positive attitude towards Christianity from Primary school. Here, respondents considered primary experience of Christianity as oppressive, a theme explored in depth in Chapter 4.



pupils “are less likely to hold a positive image of Jesus and God and to feel that they enjoy church, the Bible, prayer and the religious education and worship in which they engage at school” (1996: 51). However, a study conducted in a region of Scotland using a similar Francis attitude scale (psycho-social), found that both Secondary Catholic and non-denominational schools exert a positive attitude towards Christianity (1996:54).<sup>173</sup> The issue then, is not clear-cut and suggests regional and denominational differences, as well as distinctions between schools.

Within the schools studied by Kay and Francis, three major findings were revealed. Firstly, the syllabus in the Primary school does not make a difference to attitudes towards Christianity. Secondly, the inverse is evidenced in Secondary schools where the syllabus includes a more in-depth and comprehensive study of religions. Finally, science does not appear to have a measurable effect upon attitudes towards Christianity in Secondary schools (1996:56). From their perspective, schools do make a difference to pupils’ attitude towards Christianity. However, only part of the picture has been explored in this instance, since experiences of Christianity outwith school can also exert a considerable impact. In isolation, Francis’ view is limited. Moreover, the Scottish data in this thesis that relates to the school is far less positive, as this section has illustrated. One reason (apart from different schools and regions) might be that a different methodological approach has been adopted, that is, in-depth interviews rather than a tick box *Likert* scale.

In this thesis, indiscipline in R.M.E. is a major reason for disliking the subject.<sup>174</sup> Respondents recounted tales of pupils who would act as though R.M.E. was not a serious subject, adapting class norms to suit themselves – laughing too loud, banging tables, scraping chairs, and throwing small items to one another. Willis recorded similar actions – a common form of opposition to the authority of teachers (1977).

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<sup>173</sup> See H.M Gibson, ‘Measuring attitudes towards Christianity amongst 11-16 year olds in non-denominational schools in Scotland’ (1989). Also, J. Rhymer ‘Religious Attitudes of Roman Catholic Secondary School Pupils in Strathclyde region’ (1983).

<sup>174</sup> We can surmise further that identity in the school as a regular church-going Christian amongst a majority of non-Christians will be problematic. The school ethos towards R.M.E. can be inferred from the respondents’ talk. RME departments also tend to be small and isolated, with little collaboration with other members of staff. Few pupils take the subject at examination level, a factor that contributes to its negative identity as a ‘soft’ subject.

Experiences of R.M.E. in schools were broadly similar, despite respondents attending a range of schools including public and private. Whilst the majority of pupils felt that the subject should be taught – the primary reasons being to provide them with the right to choose what to believe, and promoting tolerance – they display hostility towards the subject goading the teacher and objecting to the Christian emphasis, real or perceived. Perceptions such as these have been carried through partly from Primary school and church experience, parental attitudes and general public opinion about the irrelevance of religion. Some of this is disseminated through media forms.

The preceding section on school and friendships illustrates the fluidity of identity and the way in which this requires constant negotiation across different contexts. Most Christian respondents took it for granted that friends and acquaintances would be hostile, or at least unreceptive, to intimations of Christianity. The respondents have shown themselves to be skilled cultural navigators, skirting between various spheres re-creating their own identity. Christians then, are obliged to navigate both church and school culture, utilising the appropriate currency as they meld into school or church enclaves. The informal school culture of the pupils is particularly salient since the values are so inimical to Christianity – opposing authority, drinking, drugs and sexual encounters – young people’s own initiation rituals toward young adulthood.

The next section explores the significance of home-life upon the development of church-going and Christian beliefs.

## **7.7 The Home: Speaking of Christianity**

This section considers other factors that assist in the shaping and playing out of Christian identity. The section considers whether it is possible to identify ways in which children are encouraged or discouraged from framing Christian beliefs and

engaging in Christian practices. Crucially, if the individual is religious – a practising Christian, for example – is maintaining this identity at home less problematic than in the school context?

Kay and Francis (1996) highlight the significance of the home in relation to religious beliefs and practices

parental church attendance is a genuine home-effect variable. The parent, or parents, if they attend church, carry out this behaviour, and it is a behaviour which, like shopping or going on holiday, affects the pattern of life in the home, a pattern which is especially relevant to the child if it involves being taken to church (1996: 60).

The finding of this research is that mothers and/or grandmothers assume a major role in discussing general religiosity, a finding echoed in the study above. Francis' research however, is limited to an explanation of religion as Christianity.

According to Mayall, children possess the ability to influence parents and social conventions of the home, particularly in comparison to school enclaves in which power with adults is curtailed. This is often disregarded, since research tends to focus on parental influence upon children and youth. Children also have the capacity to influence their parent(s) behaviour and values (1994:117). The point that Mayall wishes to stress, though perhaps overstates, is that children are indeed active agents and not merely beings who are socialised. At home, children are more likely to be recognised as negotiators of their own social worlds, whereas as school they are more likely to be projects for adult work. Children's own construction of identity therefore varies between the settings.

Parents who attend church are more likely to take their children with them (see Francis, 1996: 64), a trend confirmed in this study. What is less clear is whether the mother, or father's, influence is stronger than the peer group in shaping their values, behaviour and attitudes. Or indeed, whether it is possible to adequately separate and measure these at all. This chapter has shown that some respondents do appear to be greatly affected by peer pressure, and a smaller minority who are influenced more by

the values of Christianity. This minority – Thomas and Rachael – spoke of their beliefs as firmly buttressed by their family, as well as the church. Both respondents were able to take the Christian aspect of their identity for granted across all contexts. Indeed

'Going on' in the contexts of daily social life involves constant and unremitting work on the part of all participants in social interaction. For ordinary individuals, much of this labour passes unnoticed, so deeply ingrained is it in practical consciousness in terms of bodily control and facial expression (Giddens, 1991: 61).

By contrast, David's beliefs are supported at home but he attends a school with an anti-religious ethos. He has problems in maintaining the religious aspect of his identity. The school then, appears to make a substantial difference in some cases despite support from home.

Kay (1981) found the home to be far more influential than the school in shaping attitudes towards Christianity during the teenage years.<sup>175</sup> A further Scottish study from Francis (1993) exploring home influence on beliefs, concluded that maternal influence is strongest on both sons' and daughters' church attendance.<sup>176</sup> Francis and Kay subsequently assert that "on the brink of the teenage years the support of the father within the churchgoing home is important if the son's religious socialisation is to go smoothly" (1996:66). They also add something which speaks to the issue of the teenage church-goers in this study constructing their own version of Christianity: "The outward and public manifestations of Christianity are susceptible to parental influence; private and covert effects are much less susceptible to parental influence" (1996: 66). There is no doubt that showing positive attitudes towards Christianity is difficult in many schools and contexts. This is far easier in the private domain of the home.

The following case is rather inconclusive. Grant's (SS) is interesting because he is tacitly toying with Christianity. Uncertain about where to locate himself religiously,

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<sup>175</sup> W.K.Kay (1982) 'Marital happiness and children's attitudes to religion'.

he attempts to negotiate discussion at home. Grant does not refer to himself as Christian or religious, though communicates some affinity with Christianity at times. The school he attends, in terms of its formal and informal culture, does not encourage a positive attitude towards Christianity. It advocates a multi-faith perspective with limited assemblies of Christian content, and an attitude amongst the pupils of utter ridicule should anyone confess to being different, particularly religious (excluding Muslim or Hindu).

*Grant [SS: INT]: None of my friends go to church. There was a girl / she's left. I hardly knew her, but I knew she went to church. My dad works at the church, he's the church officer . . . I don't know [if he's a believer] he says sometimes he is, but I'm not sure if he's kidding or not. He's quite a joker at times . . . I'm not sure at all. He has to go to church on Sundays. He walks with the Bible and the big black cape on. I've been a couple of times with my charity meetings. / They want to make him an Elder as well . . . The minister is a nice man. He came to see my granny in hospital before she died. I'm not sure if my dad is a real churchgoer.*

*INT: What's a real one then?*

*Grant: I'm not sure about that either. The rest of my family are not; his brothers and sisters. But I know he believes in something, but I'm not sure what.*

According to Grant his father works (in what seems to him an ambiguous category) at the local church, and keeps his private. Grant tries to talk to him about Christianity, but without success. He spoke to me about his current beliefs:

*Grant [SS: INT]: . . . my dad working in the church . . . moved me a bit closer. The new minister, I think did a bit. When I was up seeing my granny, this was September, a year ago. He was visiting her. And he used to speak about things. The last time he saw her she wouldn't let go of his hand and he took that as a sign of God that he wouldn't see her again.*

*[talking about his mother]*

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<sup>176</sup> See Francis and Gibson (1993) 'Parental influence and adolescent religiosity: a study of church attendance and attitude towards Christianity among 11-12 and 15-16 year olds'.

*I think she's definitely not religious or spiritual. I think she believes the same type of things as me.*

*INT: Are you Christian?*

*Grant: Hmm// I'm not sure if I would call myself a Christian.*

Grant is interested in Christianity, but lacks the dynamism within his household that might encourage him in this direction. Thomas and Rachael by contrast, as well as other respondents, live with parents who practice and discuss the same faith. They also attend schools that are relatively non-hostile towards Christianity, a schooling experience that Grant lacks. It is impossible in Grant's case to determine whether school or home exerts most influence on his beliefs and values, because neither sphere is actively assisting his religious search. He may lack active parental support, but the church figures in his life quite significantly through his father's role there, and his own occasional attendance.

Steve's (MC) family are practising Christians, and his home is the most important source of support for the development of his beliefs. For instance, he had spoken about spiritual experiences encountered through his mother (see Chapter 5). His experience contrasts with Grant's above, highlighting his parents' active role in his church-going routine. Steve felt free to discuss his beliefs with his mother. However, he capitulated to peer pressure in situations where his values suggested contrary actions. Like some other respondents, he did not want to display any aspect of Christian identity in particular contexts, attempting to ally himself with the norms of his friends.

Steve said of his parents:

*Steve [MC: INT]: I don't think I would have gone [to church] in the first place if they hadn't been going . . . I think he's [his father] much the same as my mum; my dad's quite shy and my mum's outgoing, so my dad's not as likely to open up to whatever.*

*INT: Who would you say out of your parents, has influenced you the most in terms of your religious beliefs?*



*Steve: My mum, because she was the one that read to me when I was young . . . Bible stories . . . She was the one that taught me . . .*

*INT: Do you think being a Christian is a central part of your identity?*

*Steve: I don't think about it or nothing, but I know it's there and it's what really carries my life and has shaped what's happened over the years . . . I don't think I've really changed except I don't talk about it as much . . . and I don't feel I share it as much with my friends [because of 'slagging'].*

*INT: Do you share it with your parents?*

*Steve: Yeah, I can. If I need to talk about it I can.*

The claim that young people who are nurtured in their understanding and practice of Christianity, by one or both parents, are more likely to continue with their practice and beliefs, does not apply in all instances. This thesis suggests that the Secondary school ethos exerts a greater visible effect overall. This is especially compelling during later teenage years when young people are exposed to a greater variety of peers with different values and beliefs. They are likewise situated within an education system that simultaneously teaches more than one way of knowing, whilst eschewing any particular truth claim within a compulsory R.M.E. syllabus. Allegiance to Christianity is less at risk of fragmentation at home in situations where the norms are supportive, rather than in the school where the plausibility structures required for sustenance barely exist. At home the Christian self can be legitimately on display with little risk of shame or ridicule, provided the parent(s) supports the beliefs. However, at church some Christian respondents feel uncomfortable. This is considered below as a final sphere in influencing Christian identity.

## **7.8 The Church**

As with family and school, so too with the church: children do not merely belong to such organisations, but continuously take part in their creation (Maynall, 1994:120). They are always in the process of becoming (*ibid.*,155). Becoming a Christian is not



something done to individuals, mechanistically internalised, but is a process of negotiated being. And if as the last chapter demonstrates, young Christians are growing up with more liberal and permissive attitudes (from friends and media, for example) then we may surmise from current trends that various Christian collectives may become so liberalised that almost anything goes. There is already evidence in this direction – aspects such as the questioning of miracles like the virgin birth.

Church experiences from childhood, whether school or home inspired, flavour perceptions held during youth. If these preliminary experiences are associated with boredom, they will inevitably affect subsequent attitudes towards Christianity. Most respondents said that they were compelled to attend church by parents or school. This might account in part for their perspective of Christianity as controlling, and denying self-freedom.

Whilst Rachael and Thomas in particular, described the positive feelings engendered in their ongoing experience of church, in distinction Steve conveyed some hesitancy about self-presentation amongst non-Christian peers, and also amongst other Christians. At church he was not part of an ‘in-group’ with his young contemporaries:

*Steve [MC: INT]: My best friends are probably the people I would talk to the most . . . Non-church people . . . Nobody I've really met in the church shares the same interests and feelings as me on things . . . Most of the people in my church are middle class, and they're not people who'd go out partying.*

Like Martha (who attends his church), Steve is aware of the congregational class composition. He categorised himself as working class. He experienced feelings of difference, of not fitting-in with his fellow church attendees across all age groups.<sup>177</sup> Those conveying most confidence in being a member of their church community – Rachael and Thomas – described themselves as middle class.

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<sup>177</sup> Feelings of exclusion on the basis of socio-economic background are not surprising given that most church-attendees are ‘middle class’ according to Davie (Davie, 1990: 463).

In a Scottish study, Gibson, Francis and Pearson (1990) found that amongst fourteen and fifteen year olds those from lower social class backgrounds exhibited a more positive attitude toward Christianity. This is despite the fact that parents and teenagers from higher social class backgrounds attend church more often. Based on similar studies across the rest of the UK, results indicate that church attendance and social class show similar correlations. This research does not support these claims, since those from lower social class backgrounds were more likely to feel *less* integrated into the church community. In particular they were more wary of revealing their Christian identity amongst non-church peers, though whether Francis might consider this as evidence of exhibiting a less positive attitude to Christianity is not clear. It is noted, however, that the sample in this study was small and therefore not representative of a solid link between class and religiosity.

Steve's church draws its congregation primarily from professional affluent backgrounds such as doctors and lawyers. His parents are not local to Edinburgh and are not engaged in 'professional' occupations. This might account partially for his feelings of being 'outside' of the church, a sentiment also intimated on behalf of his mother, and an issue similarly identified by Martha.

Like Steve, Martha transposed herself to the idea of the 'good Christian', drawing boundaries similar to those described by non-Christians (see Chapter 4). Bruce suggests that many modern claims to be religious – Christian – might stem from a desire to appear virtuous, like Thomas indicated earlier (Bruce, 1996:33).<sup>178</sup>

Although Martha is not entirely integrated into her church, she described it as homely. Not only did she sense something approximating class bias, but also she has difficulty agreeing with some of the beliefs restricting the modern lifestyle. For instance, the anti-gay stance, and limiting the consumption of alcohol:

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<sup>178</sup> See R. Hoggart (1962).

*Martha [MC: INT]: There's something funny about our church, it's like really homely; it's like you belong to a family in our church. It was better when the old Minister was there but now that he's gone I don't know what's going to happen . . . I think some of them are quite 'up themselves'. This is just me, cause probably people you've seen before haven't said this, but people like Heidi, they're really nice people but, they don't really see the side of life that I do, because I'm not as rich as all of them and don't come from such a respectable background . . . You have to be respectable to go to church . . . If people aren't good in a group then it's hard to 'get in' . . . I don't know how to explain it. I just think that sometimes, you have to have a car or something like that / the congregation is a rich congregation.*

Martha sat on the second level of the church on the back row with Rachael. Heidi sat with her family and Ross with his. After the service there was an informal tea. The younger people stood together talking; Martha always appeared a little awkward, holding her head down and avoiding eye contact with most of them. She had said during interview

*Martha [MC: INT]: People say I don't have much confidence.*

The above conveys an aura of respectability associated with church-going. In turn, part of this so-called respectability concerns the conspicuous display of wealth: in the clothes worn, cars driven and monies collected as 'offerings'. Correspondingly, there is also the narrow focus of some church-goers that Martha accuses of ignoring a proportion of the congregation's needs. Martha does not reside in an area of affluence and her dress code is casual in contrast to the other young churchgoers. Her family's lack of material prosperity may explain why she felt unable to 'get in' to the church properly. Martha felt doubly alienated: from school for being a Christian, and from the church because she could not belong. One consequence is that she is unable to show her 'self' both in church and at school amongst peers.

David (RS) has strong familial support, but minimal involvement with people at church. Moreover, the school he attends holds a less than positive attitude towards

Christianity. On a formal level, there are limited assemblies with religious content owing to opposition from both teachers and pupils.<sup>179</sup> Religious Education as a subject in its own right is not accorded high value; few students take the subject at examination level, and some respondents claimed the teacher took little interest in the subject, particularly Christianity. This is in contrast to the private school attended by Thomas with a strong Christian tradition; also Heidi's school, with a considerable proportion of pupils from church-going and affluent backgrounds.

Heidi is a church associate of both Rachael and Martha, though they all attend different schools. Heidi attends Christian events for young people at a larger more informal and inter-denominational church. Many of her friends from school participate. This gathering of youth from different churches represents an extension of the local church and supports the development of collegiality and sense of belonging:

*Heidi [MC: INT]: It's worship in singing but also not like in church, it's totally different you know what I mean? It's much more modern, they have bands that play, like just normal bands, like stuff you get on TV, except they're Christians. And there'll be a speaker as well so that will cover issues like abortion and all that sort of stuff, but not all kids go along to that.*

Several Christian respondents stressed the importance of spending time with other young Christians outwith their church, such as activities mentioned by Heidi above. There were also Christian camps. Samantha, often embarrassed about her Christian identity, presents a favourable account of camp regardless of any general misgivings:

*INT: Did you feel a kind of shared identity with the people that were there?*

*Samantha [EC: INT]: Yeah . . . I was feeling different and then this made me realise that God actually was there, but I've not felt it for ages . . . There was like a thousand people my own age . . . it was like NORMAL and normal music and I listened to Robbie Williams and stuff. It was really good and you could feel loads of*

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<sup>179</sup> As I had taught in this school I was aware of the R.M.E. ethos across the school. The school

*folk become Christians and stuff . . . They all went into a room with like counsellors, and then they became Christians.*

These camps engender positive experiences amongst Christian respondents in contrast to some of their more ordinary experiences of church. For instance, Ross [MC] considered his church in the following mixed terms:

*Ross [MC: INT]: Boring. Sleeping. Bible. Minister. Preaching. Singing. Friends. . . You kind of feel together, I think. You feel you're kind of like one, you're all part of a church . . . but when you're out, you just feel [it's] a Bible class with friends . . . [The Minister] yaps on too much . . . there's no need to go on that long . . . Sometimes he gets into a hole . . . You have to think really hard . . . Sometimes your mind just gives up . . . It isn't the first time [that young people] have complained. Well, they haven't complained, but talked about it.*

*INT: So what would you change about your church to make it more enjoyable for you?*

*Ross: The appearance I think. It's not very bright. It needs a kind of lift, I suppose. To make it more interesting. The sermon I'd probably cut down if I could. Make it a wee bit more thoughtful, but not so that you'd drift off.*

Griffiths observed teenage girls at different clubs. One of these had loose Christian undertones: the Girls' Friendly Society. Although she did not examine whether anything 'Christian' occurred in this group, her research revealed that collectively the girls who attended were ambivalent when talking about the experience of attending the club. On their own however, they expressed enjoyment primarily because of the opportunity they had to take part in dancing at the club. Like my experience of YF at the church, she describes similarly the pleasant atmosphere of the club and its strange mixture of formality and informality. The clubs appeared to attract girls for the opportunity of interaction as opposed to the activity provided (1995: 147). This resonates with most of the church-going respondents referred to herein. They are attending church largely because they glean gratification from

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continues to have a high turnover in R.M.E. teachers.

interacting with friends there. However, this need not imply that associated teachings are not also important. If this were the case, there are other clubs available with the sole purpose of sociability.

A further parallel with Griffiths is the reluctance amongst girls to speak favourably about the club in a group setting whilst individual interviews revealed the contrary. This demonstrates concern about the presentation of self amongst peers, the focus of this chapter, or perhaps a willingness to please the interviewer during one-to-one interaction. The latter can probably be ruled out since concern with self presentation amongst peers proved to be a general finding

Hall's constructive comments on identity highlight the tension people experience with identities. It seems that "within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about (Hall, 1992: 277), as this thesis demonstrates. The entire EC group encountered instances where they felt embarrassment about some conspicuous display of their Christian identity in the presence of others. Most were now beyond this to a certain extent and felt compelled to share their beliefs with friends. All empathised with the feeling of having been found out, enduring considerable discomfiture. Simon discussed his former anxiety upon entering the church:

[EC: FG]

*Simon: Well, I kind of live in that area, and when I started going and that, these people would be standing outside before the YF and I'd see someone come down the road, and I'd think, 'Oh no! The door's locked, how am I gonnae get in?' And like, it was a really big thing.*

*[People nod and appear to empathise]*

*[&] Now if someone comes past, I'll ask them if they want to come in, and ask my friends to YF and if they come along make them feel welcome / or try.<sup>180</sup>*

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<sup>180</sup> Engaging in some participant observation at their church verified the sentiment above. On two occasions arriving to participate in the YF, groups of youths were loitering outside the church, taunting such protests as 'Are you Christians, like? [laughter] There's no such thing!' I observed the



Samantha retains this sense of unease at being observed entering church. Reading her awkward expression, I asked whether she had visited any churches nearer home, to which she exclaimed;

*Samantha [EC: INT]: I'd NEVER go to a church in Pentland!*

*INT: Why?*

*Samantha: In case someone saw me!*

Samantha's views on her church are quite distinct from Thomas and analogous to Simons'. All of the young people in their group (EC) valued the forum provided for youth:

*Samantha [EC: INT]: If we never had YF, I don't think I'd go to church. People like Simon wouldn't go. Lesley wouldn't go. Jane wouldn't go; Sean wouldn't go; Michael wouldn't go; Jill wouldn't go. A lot of us wouldn't go.*

*INT: Have you tried any other churches?*

*Samantha: Yeah, but ours seems to be the best . . . it's more relaxed and you can do what you want and stuff . . . I think our church has the biggest youth . . . I wouldn't go if it was just old people. . . [On complaining about the church]. . . We've all been brought up the way the church believes. I've gone since I was little because it's the church my mum and dad always went to, so I don't know. I think everyone looks on you, like - 'Sarah, she shouldn't think that!'*

*INT: So you like the church to see you in a certain way then?*

*Samantha: Yeah [laughs].*

Most church-going respondents experienced positive feelings in being part of a church, sentiments described by Durkheim:

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young people reacting with awkwardness as they entered the church, managing to maintain some composure. Moreover, one evening at the YF, we were greeted by teasing youths, and during the proceedings a brick was hurled at the window. Wire mesh over the glass prevented any damage.



Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups . . . [Rites] are not merely received individually by all the members of this group; they are something belonging to a group, and they make its unity. The individuals that compose it feel themselves united to each other by the simple fact that they have a common faith. (1915: 42,44).

Samantha's current feelings for her church are based more upon nostalgia (part of her personal history) than on a sense of being part of a faith community. That is, she has difficulty in sustaining a collective identity with the congregation, a problem similarly encountered by Simon. Both held beliefs and attitudes contrary to their church's teachings such as pro-abortion, pro drugs and alcohol, and believe it is acceptable to interpret Christianity in their own unique manner, regardless of whether their version conforms to more official church teachings:

*Samantha [EC: INT]: I don't really hold many 'proper' Christian views actually . . . I don't really look on Christianity as being my RELIGION. I don't know why. I just think of it as being there, because I suppose Christians don't really fast or do a lot of what other religions do. So I look on them [other religions] as being the strange ones . . . [the church is] somewhere you go to every Sunday to meet your friends / where you sing / Bible class. I don't really like Bible class . . . it's just really boring. I never really listen. I just sit there going 'ohhhh'.*

*INT: Do you think other people do that?*

*Samantha: Elaine does. We come out every Sunday and go, 'that was crap, eh?' Thomas doesn't. He sits there and answers all the questions – and Mark and Marie. [My brother] doesn't go any more, he just goes to the YF at night.<sup>181</sup>*

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<sup>181</sup> The interview with Samantha had taken place in her neat and freshly decorated bedroom. She brought coffee from the kitchen and a large tin of biscuits and sat tranquilly positioned on her bed; I sat at the foot surrounded by my recording equipment. She appeared relaxed in her own personal space. I noticed the lack of visual signs of Christianity in her room, in contrast for example, with what I had seen in Rachael's room. Both rooms were similar with books and personal possessions lying on furniture. Each had a stereo and a few pictures of pop icons on the wall. It is interesting that Rachael was willing to display Christian signification in her personal space where friends might gather, and that they all knew about her Christianity. Whereas Sarah did not display any Christian representations and conversely did not wish friends to know that she attends church regularly.

A growing body of literature on minority ethnic and religious groups in Britain describes the difficulties which young people face in negotiating their identities (Jacobsen, 1997; Ballard, 1984; Ali, 1992). However, identity research from the perspective of young British Christians is deficient. As a group, young regular church-going Christians are receding to minority status. Research in this area then, is particularly salient.

The preceding sections have drawn attention to the difficulties faced by some of the life-long Christians in identifying with Christianity across particular secularised contexts. The rationale of this approach is to throw into relief both extremes: the individual who appears to be a non-problematically committed Christian, and the Christian who appears less committed in the sense of being extremely sensitive to the reactions of others. The latter are especially likely to challenge more of the Christian teachings of their respective churches. This challenge however is never direct, partly because they want to resist 'standing out' in church as well as in secularised settings - a double bind. To some extent - in the case of the Presbyterian church, for example - there is little opportunity to present such challenges, in particular because there is not a clear youth forum.

Respondents reveal a variety of sensitivities to the way that others perceive them, both within and outwith the church. They have drawn attention to the content of currently acceptable beliefs, behaviours and components of young identities in contemporary society. This highlights some of the pressures that young people experience in the company of friends and peers currently related to being Christian.

Unlike the young people in ethnicity studies such as those conducted by Jacobsen (1997), where religion is often a stronger and more universal identity marker than ethnicity, Christian identity anchorage is weak. Attending church represents a collective process of boundary construction and maintenance, evoking feelings of solidarity, but in day-to-day life this is barely apparent to most of them. Like young Muslims who face such difficulties as discomfiture in public houses amongst drinking friends, many young Christians find themselves subjected to similar strains.

On a more positive note however (like Jacobsen's young Muslims), Christianity offers to some, a moral framework or source of "coherent guidance which enables them to rise above the uncertainties of existence in a world which they perceive as comprising two cultures" (Jacobsen, 1997: 254)

## **7.9 Self and Identity**

This section looks at identity from a particular theoretical and sociologically informed perspective. Raffel's (1999) distinction between *role* and *identity* provides some insight into what being a Christian actually means and also suggests what the practice of 'becoming' actually entails. Specifically, he explores the extent to which identity can be expressed through a role whilst simultaneously realising one's self. Questions such as whether sociological literature speaks clearly to issues of identity and what identity might look like are considered in what follows.

Raffel (1999) aspires towards an understanding of a committed reflexivity, directing the reader through the history of role theory from the perspective of key protagonists theorising self and identity. Resting finally at a perspective informed by the positions of Mead (1952) – Blum and McHugh (1984) – Taylor (1989), allows for the existence of a committed self at the core of identity, whilst simultaneously conceding that the individual agent is active and reflexive. Table 5 presents an outline of movement through versions of role theory and their associated limitations on self, towards an identity grounded in a sense of who I am. Following this is a brief discussion of corresponding theorists and their stance on identity. Subsequently this is applied to some of the respondents.

**Table 5      A Sociological Movement through Role to Identity**

<b>ROLE</b>	<b>SELF</b>
<b>Internalization (Parsons)</b>	<b>Negative</b>
<b>Role-Conflict (Merton)</b>	<b>Negative</b>
<b>Role-Distance (Goffman)</b>	<b>Negative</b>
<b>Role Expectations/ Contingencies (Zimmerman)</b>	<b>Negative+</b>
<b>Alienated (Marx)</b>	<b>Negative (rootless)</b>
<b>Tourist (Giddens)</b>	<b>Negative (rootless)</b>
<b>Otherness (Mead)</b>	<b>Self-Object+</b>
<b>Principles (Blum/McHugh)</b>	<b>Self-Reflective+</b>
<b>Moral Frameworks (Taylor)</b>	<b>Identity+</b>

The plus signs to the right indicate the emergence of a positive and less determined self than those labelled negative. Briefly, Parson's (1951) notion of the individual who has 'internalized norms' is negative because this implies a mechanical self where roles are assumed merely to fulfil the expectations of others. He can also be criticised for presenting an over-socialised conception of people, thereby allowing them little agency.<sup>182</sup> A person who only complies with social expectations has lost their sense of self. Similarly Merton's (1969) 'role conflict' is subject to criticism

<sup>182</sup> For a classic outline of the over-socialisation of 'man' theory see D. Wrong (1961).

because this does not allow room for a self because conflict is resolved by compliance with someone else's expectations. Goffman's idea of role-distance attempts to go further, but is unable to imagine the active and involved role player as someone with a visible positive self. And whilst Zimmerman's (1970) conceptualisation of 'role expectation' and contingent internalisation allows for the development of a competent self, the emergent self is rigid. From this perspective, an actor need only *act* to attain competence. Once again, this fails to fit with the idea of *expressing* a self.

For Raffel, the Marxist perspective (in which production and alienation are central) is equally problematic, positing a self condemned to rootlessness within current social structural parameters since

[W]e reach self realisation only when/if we are productive. At the same time there is the caveat that if, as is almost always the case at least in capitalist society, we are forced to produce under conditions of alienated labour, it is certainly not the case that what we produce is really us (Raffel, 1.3).

Cohen's (1989) recent Marxist perspective bears similarities to Raffels' emphasis upon self consciousness, veering toward reflexivity. In this analysis production is not absolutely crucial. Cohen argues that Marx went too far in the materialist direction and thereby "failed to do justice to the self's irreducible interest in a definition of itself, and to the social manifestations of that interest" (1989: 154). He suggests that an important area of human need and aspiration are missing in Marx's account:

A person does not only need to develop and enjoy his powers. He needs to know *who he is, and how his identity connects him with the particular other*. . . *He* must be able to identify himself with some part of objective social reality: Spirit, as Hegel said, finds itself at home in its own otherness as such . . . [P]eople do not usually lack an identity: they receive an identity as a by-product of the rearing process . . . [It] is not that people are motivated by their need for identity, but that they are motivated by their identity, for which they have a strong need, and the motivating power of identity reflects the strength of the need identity fulfils (1989:156).

Marxism, he continues, has failed to address the fundamental issue of 'who I am'. Cohen attempts to locate this through communion in a shared culture – such as nationalism or religion. Whilst Cohen gives an interesting flavour to Marxism considering self-identity as fundamentally more important than production, his argument is difficult to assuage for two reasons: unsubstantial evidence to support his claim, and the failure to seriously consider that phenomena such as nationalism or gender (which do indeed forge components of identity), may themselves be a product of class struggle or competing interests from a Marxist perspective.

Referring back to Table 5, Giddens is criticised for positing a transient self – fluid and nomadic – almost 'tourist-like' (Raffel: 9.8). He puts forward a notion of reflexivity in which the self and relationships are constantly (re)constituted in modernity. This is a perspective that denies the selves of pre-modernity any capacity for change. His ideal of the morally autonomous individual with the ability to shape their own moral judgements is one of the lynchpins of structuration theory, describing a situation in which each seeks his/her own satisfaction. The 'me' is not central, rather the egotistical 'I' is what really matters – the 'I' that reflexively constitutes the 'me' of its own choice in an ongoing project. Giddens presents a self that pursues immediate emotional satisfaction.

Giddens' locates his discussion of identity within 'late modernity', sharing similar concerns to Castells (1997). For Giddens, the self has become a reflexive project in which "individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options . . . Reflexively organised life-planning . . . becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991:11). In contrast, Castells veers towards the impossibility of reflexive life-planning in modern 'network society'. This information or network society, is based upon "the disjunction between the local and the global . . . The search for meaning takes place then in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles" (1997: 11).

For Raffel, only a combination of the Mead – Blum and McHugh – Taylor position allows for a self that is an object to itself (Mead). In this sense the self is self-



reflective forging an identity through the application of moral frameworks (Taylor). The following example of the committed teacher illustrates this logic (in Raffel, 1999 from L. Blum, 1994).

Kohl – a teacher – is asked whether he would be willing to provide extra teaching to a boy he does not particularly like. He can easily refuse since this is not a requirement of his role as teacher. However, he accepts and teaches the boy outwith school hours. He has no apparent compulsion to do this but considers that this is the right thing to do, and not what is merely expected. Hence unlike the rule-guided actor of some theorists, he shows himself to be principled. Raffel develops the implications of the teacher's actions in the value of commitment. In this sense something of the self is revealed through commitment because this demonstrates the teacher's values or principles. An individual might be competent assuming a role – teachers, or church-goers – but to transcend competency requires commitment. Such commitment reveals the self and is characterised by a non awareness of

certain (formal) options as choices not because he is (deeply) unaware of them but because, given his commitments, he has long since worked out what is part and parcel of his job. These actions are now so much a part of what he is that he hardly notices he is choosing them . . . [H]e feels he has no real choice . . . [Kohl] is fully reflexively aware of what a teacher ought to do, so aware that perhaps he has ceased to notice . . . all the necessary decisions, all the . . . choices that his work involves him in (1999: 9.8).

The respondents in this research, Rachael and Thomas for example, are similar to the example above in so far as they demonstrate through their actions an affirmation of their beliefs, values and principles. With the examples of Thomas and Rachael something of their self is revealed in their accounts of behaviour with others across different contexts. They show that they are objects to themselves by reflecting on the possible significance of their actions. By contrast, respondents who attempted to conceal their Christian identity fail to reveal

someone who is simultaneously fulfilling social needs, realising social values, i.e. performing a role, and realising their self . . . It is clearly possible to



express one's identity or principles via how one carries out his or her role (Raffel, 1999: sec. 8.7, 8.8).

It is not that they lack a self, rather their self is less committed to Christianity as people like Rachael and Thomas.

When the examples above are contrasted with Samantha or Simon for instance, it is clear that not all church-goers are committed in the sense of "someone who obviously has certain things that matter to him, that he cares about and also that these 'frameworks' can orient him, even to the point of causing him to dismiss some of his own reactions" (*ibid.*, 8.6). Raffel considers just *how* this is one's self. The answer lies in the fact that

he is an object to himself in that he is reflecting on the possible significance of what he does . . . A person's identity or fundamental principles is clearly at least one version of their self but identity . . . works quite differently than role distance . . . [because] it is clearly possible to express one's identity or principles via how one carries out his or her role (*ibid.*, 8.8).

Blum and McHugh's (1984) social actor is envisaged as an individual engaged in moral reflexivity. He/she follows rules because s/he wishes to do so. They add to this the idea of a principled actor engaging in action that their principles suggest are worth doing well.

The view of self from the position of Raffel – Blum and McHugh – Mead – Taylor, applied to the Christians in this study shows principled actors revealing something of their Christian self, illustrating their moral frameworks and where their values and principles lie. The chapter has shown conversely, Christian actors who are less principled in this respect. This does not mean that they are unprincipled actors *per se*, rather that their principles and commitments do not lie wholly with Christianity. Indeed a large body of sociological literature (Giddens and Castells being particularly prominent), focuses upon the tensions involved in identity maintenance, a theme that has emerged strongly in this research – particularly tensions across

secularised settings – and perhaps more surprisingly, the church. Nearly all respondents regardless of religiosity demonstrate concern for deep meaning, understanding and location in life. Relationships with others are particularly important, not only from the perspective of what they hope to gain from relationships, but of what they can give and commit to, contrary to the type of nomadic self depicted by Giddens. These concerns represent part of their ‘fundamental orientations’ (Taylor, 1989).

‘Identity’ as an explanatory device can help to explain behaviour associated with church-going, particularly from the perspective of youth as a period of acute concern over identity formations. A committed Christian identity in modern Scotland is fraught with tensions, no longer affecting the majority in any depth. Coming out as a Christian is more difficult today than at many other points in history. Whilst the pre-Reformation was certainly not a golden age of religion, and differentiated religious ideas existed to varying degrees, the crucial point is that almost everybody believed in some of the central tenets of Christianity. This is clearly no longer the case. A similar observation can be applied to 1950’s Britain, which compared to the end of the twentieth century, was suffused with the Christian narrative.

It is difficult to sustain an identity that a considerable majority of a given population scorns. Moreover, identity has to be in some sense available within contexts. The circumstances in which some of the young Christians find themselves impedes commitment – Martha, David and Samantha at their respective schools, for example. However, it might not be fair to deduce that they are not committed, rather inhibited by context; although when we examine their behaviour in church, as well as secular settings, then this does appear to be an accurate assumption. Indeed, those who showed themselves to be uncomfortable about ‘coming out’ in secular social settings were also more likely to feel uncomfortable amongst other Christians in church.

The view of self and identity informed by the position of Raffel suggests some principled actors revealing something of their Christian self and some Christian

actors who appear less principled, that is, less willing to allay their values with Christianity.

One solution to the problem of being a Christian in secular contexts is to 'come out' like Rachael and Thomas, though the spaces they inhabit make this easier. Another solution is to deny this or make no claim to the possibility of being one. However, the attempts to deal with the tensions involved in negotiating a Christian identity where this fact is concealed, are negative and lead to the inculcation of a split life in which the individual feels happy in neither sphere.

## **7.10 Conclusion**

Identity is important and provides bearings in the world. Without a framework people would never be able to answer any questions (Taylor, 1989). For instance, David (Jehovah's Witness) cannot express what he is. By contrast, Rachael and Thomas have it easier, abiding by a solid framework that orients them to the world.

Notwithstanding the contributions from classical social theory – Marx (1818-83), Durkheim (1858-1917) and Weber (1864-1920)) which spoke and continue to speak to the issue of self and identity – most modern theories have made limited contributions to this issue. Indeed, identity is presented as an impenetrable concept. In particular, literature addressing the issue of maintaining a Christian identity in a society where this influences a minority is noticeable by its absence. Sustaining this identity is increasingly difficult, especially for young people who strive towards inclusion and sameness within school enclaves. Support from home is one thing, but if the individual feels 'different' in both church and school, this can result in a problematic identity, a confused moral framework, and reticence at revealing the self. The perspective adopted by Raffel, informed by Mead and Taylor, goes further than most sociological analysis of identity. That is, room is allowed for a principled and committed self that is not merely determined by social structures but is reflexive.

However, it may be premature to rule out the insights of Marx altogether. Raffel's approach does provide some depth of understanding about identity problematics, but ultimately as the conjectures on religion in this thesis have suggested, the committed self may have further to go, but cannot be realised under social conditions in which psycho-social malaise continues. We can refer to this as disenchantment, alienation or anomie.

Returning to the quote at the opening of this chapter and considering the data in this thesis, Mercer's observation seems accurate. Whilst being Christian was hardly a problem for respondents at Primary school, this identity became increasingly problematic during the transition to Secondary school where the multi-faceted identity of 'pupil' conflicts with identity as Christian. This emergent pupil identity is exposed to other knowledge claims that provoke experiences of doubt and uncertainty. Hence "when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty", identity becomes an issue (Mercer, 1990: 43).

The sociology of religion that focuses on measurements of church-attendees across time cannot capture the complexities involved in identity construction and maintenance. It is only through communicating with people in some depth that this can be achieved. Additionally, insights gleaned from a qualitative approach have the further advantage of revealing social actors *actively* engaged with their identities, reacting to and acting upon the expectations that others have forged about Christians. Paradoxically, reacting in a manner that denies or conceals a relation to Christianity unwittingly adds to the very dilemma of the difficulty in 'coming out' as a Christian.

## **Chapter 8 Conclusion: Re-considering Secularisation**

### **8.1 A Neu(c)rotic Church?**

At the crux of secularisation theories is the claim that religion is in decline. This decline is evident in terms of the breadth, scope, power and social significance of religion. Focusing solely upon church statistics and considering the church's historical role does appear to confirm this impression. The problem here, however, is the conflation of religion and church. The church alone stands as a poor indicator of the vitality of religion since, as sociologists such as Luckmann (1967) maintain, religiosity is not only found within churches, but actually encompasses great breadth. Yet, variables often used to measure religiosity, including surveys designed to gauge broad trends in non-orthodox beliefs, are often inextricably linked to the central tenets of Christianity, so that what is actually measured is the degree of belief and practice associated with Christianity. This has been contested throughout the thesis.

Secularisation theories are generally characterised by three main features: the fragmentation of societies and social life; the disappearance of community and the growth of large-scale bureaucracies (nationally and internationally), and increasing rationalisation. All three are considered as presenting countervailing effects against religion (Bruce, 1996: 36). These central variables have already been discussed drawing largely upon Bruce's insights, a prominent British sociologist of religion. Issues allied to declining church-going rates have also been explored, considering reactions and explanations from both sociologists and churches. This final conclusion considers secularisation theories in more detail from the vantage of some other major theorists in conjunction with Bruce, and relating their claims to the data. Tschannen is particularly instructive in this field (1991).

A central concern addressed in secularisation theories, regards change in the scope of power previously held by the church. In historical terms this has been practically

eradicated in conjunction with the process of modernisation. As societies developed – slowly with the Enlightenment – and more quickly with the onset of industrialisation, social differentiation became more distinct. One effect of this upon a monolithic church was that competing churches evolved from the earlier dominant tradition. Accompanying this trend, increasing urbanisation and the role of technology in manufacture, culminated in the specialisation of institutions generally. In sum, the role and power of the church began to diminish and fragment in the face of modernisation, encountering counter-claims to knowledge and a condensed social role.

The eighteenth century Church of Scotland, for example, had considerable scope in that it provided not only religious services, but education, social welfare, social control, government bureaucracy, as well as rudimentary health care (Bruce, 1996: 43). However, the increasing specialisation of institutions heralded a reduction in the traditional impact of the religious institution, that is, its roles and scope for power were dramatically curtailed as church and state became increasingly divorced.

Nevertheless, one point to consider before reaching the conclusion that religion is all but dead, is that the church actually enjoyed a past, heightened *secular* authority (authority in the social spheres of education, social welfare, and law), in terms of the breadth and range of roles assumed. When religious commentators allege a religious world then – in contrast to now – it seems that they are actually in large part, referring to a past secular world buttressed by the essentially non-religious aspects of the church. That is, its social, economic, and political position of authority. This means that the power the church has lost in influencing everyday life in contemporary society, is the story of the decline of an institution and *not* religiosity. From this angle it is the secular arm that has declined, and not necessarily the amount of religion in a particular society. Studies mentioned previously, illustrate the extent to which many people traditionally held to beliefs alongside Christianity, varying according to region, and categorised by some as folk religion. So, although most people believed in the central tenets of Christianity, historically this was not the only form of religiosity prominent in people's lives. To



argue otherwise is to say that the church *is* religion/osity, rather than one possible mediator.

Some of the avenues taken by churches in their attempt to sustain and increase numbers have been explored, particularly those directed towards young people. Largely these have met with limited success, which is hardly surprising in view of respondents' perceptions of the church (Chapters 4 and 5).

According to Chaves, one useful way of looking at secularisation is to focus on the issue of religious authority. Chaves argues that secularisation "is best understood not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority" (1994:750). Therefore, it is the orientation which people have to religious authority structures that is significant and not the quantities of individual religious beliefs and behaviours. Indeed, many of the respondents objected to the claims of authority from churches, particularly on issues of morality and the implications for people's behaviour.

The data also indicates evidence of religiosity in people's lives, expressed as either institutional religion or spirituality. As Bruce points out, the latter is characteristically pick'n'mix, and involves selecting beliefs from what seems like an array of religious supermarkets. In this thesis, it is evident that this type of religiosity is utilised to make sense of life events or crises – in other words, as attempts to find meaning. In line with the claims of secularisation, most of these beliefs and behaviours are outwith the parameters of the teachings of Christianity. Beliefs related to Christianity cannot be discounted altogether though, since children continue to experience a limited form of churching mediated through schooling or family. On balance however, it is not possible to argue against the thesis that the scope and breadth of institutional church power has declined in modern Britain. Fragmentation in this sense is obvious. Remaining denominations no longer provide education, health and welfare; and their relationship to the nation-state has been radically curtailed. The church has lost its monopoly on religiosity and the secular power it once wielded.



## 8.2 Societalisation

The second central feature of secularisation pivots on the idea that modernisation has led to the eclipse of traditional community structures, an important element for sustaining the continuing power and vitality of religion. The claim is that life has shifted from the local to becoming enmeshed societally, hence such terms as societalisation and worldliness. Ideologically, it is suggested that people hold less in common in contemporary societies, to the extent that the single worldview is de-legitimised. To draw out the contrast between then and now, one of the functions of traditional community oriented religion had been to celebrate and sanctify shared values. Or, from a more critical perspective, endowed existing social relations with a rigid prescriptiveness that could not be easily challenged.

In modern societies, particularly at the level of human behaviour, if we accept the notion of societalisation, then the concomitant absence of a religious community inspired conscience means that other more technical and apparently efficient means of surveillance and organisation become increasingly important to modern ways of living. Moreover, cultural diversity - a feature of societalisation - also contributes towards challenges to the single worldview, to the extent that religion becomes an issue of considerable personal preferences – that is, relatively voluntaristic as opposed to prescribed by birth.

The data in the preceding chapter has shown respondents who do consider religiosity, however defined, as an issue of personal preference not to be imposed on others. The same applies amongst the church-going Christians. This is most apparent in such statements as ‘we should all be what we want be’, or, ‘I don’t mind as long as no-one preaches it at me’. Further evidence of the decline of religious authority in people’s daily lives can be adduced from the committed churchgoers who did not wish to reveal their Christian identity. Their embarrassment is partly founded upon recognition of being part of a minority in Scotland, and an awareness of others’ perceptions of what

living a Christian life might mean. Its reputation is outmoded. Choosing one's beliefs, or at least the sense of being able to select them, is important to all respondents, including the church-goers, who relayed their beliefs as very pick'n'mix. They argue that their beliefs are based on voluntarism in the sense that they are able to select their own way of interpreting Christian teachings. Moreover, some respondents choose beliefs and behaviours that can be categorised as 'common religion'. The former are sanctioned in the formal institutional setting, whilst the latter beliefs are accorded meaning with degrees of credulity amongst more informal settings, such as amid peers and family (discussed in Chapter 6).

As to the issue of lack of community inspired conscience – owing to the eclipse of traditional community structures – it is not clear where the boundaries of this term might lie. Moreover, attitudes amongst respondents on issues such as helping those in need, suggest that regardless of church or non-church affiliation, people ought to enact some responsibility towards others. The greatest schism rests upon whether help ought to be given to those who (apparently) contribute to the situation they find themselves in, such as employment and homelessness. Where this is deemed to be the case, then primarily non-church-goers maintained that individual's should help their self, rather than rely upon the assistance of others, such as the state.

In terms of affiliation with Christianity and the idea of a moral community (proposed by Gill, 1992), gender emerged more strongly in this thesis. Specifically, amongst those engaging in voluntary work (unpaid employment), Gilligan's female ethic of care is instructive (1982:pp.64-105). Voluntary workers were overwhelmingly female and the work was associated with traditional female roles, such as caring for others. Across the sample, there was no evidence suggesting the existence of a clearly defined Christian moral community.

In sum, it can be argued that there is some sense of community inspired conscience amongst respondents in terms of concern for others and the environment, but that in line

with modern political thinking, this is very individualistic and barely focused locally. This finding applies to all groups in the sample, indicating a qualitative shift in concern for the environment and other people. This tends to be in *global* and not local terms, such as anxiety regarding the global effects of pollution and nuclear issues, as well as concern expressed about people from developing countries.

Several other points can be raised about the alleged impact of societalisation. For instance, Bruce's (1996) conclusion of the corrosion of religion is based upon past historical developments, and cannot be rationally projected into the future. In other words, the community inspired conscience attributed to religion may not continue to be absent in the future. This also raises the question of the extent to which there can ever be a community inspired conscience in the absence of religion, however defined. Indeed, as Fenn (1970) has indicated, the current situation is neither fixed nor certain, and may well reverse. As to the issue of societalisation contributing to the implausibility of a single worldview, a more general religiosity may actually be strengthened by the de-legitimation of the single worldview: it is the traditional monolithic worldview which loses its plausibility and is de-legitimised – not religiosity.

### **8.3 Rationalisation**

The final emphasis of secularisation is rationalisation, deemed to be characteristic of modern societies. This is inextricably linked to fragmentation (or automisation/privatisation) and societalisation above. The claim is that rationalisation exerts effects upon religion, an ongoing process which embodies "a concern with routines and procedures, with predictability and order, with a search for ever-increasing efficiency" (Bruce, 1996:47). A post-Enlightenment rational world is a world apparently less conducive to religion, in which predictability is supposed and where everything is potentially amenable to improvement.

Historically, it is not clear where the beginnings of secularisation can be located, particularly the element of rationalisation. For Berger (1969), the process of secularisation began early in historical terms, with religious rationalisation located in ancient Judaism rather than the later process of Enlightenment thinking and subsequent industrialisation. Like Luckmann (1967), he highlights the subsequent division between 'this-worldly' and 'other-worldly' aspects of religion. That is, modernisation requires religion to become more firmly oriented to affairs of the daily world, mirroring its procedures, for example. Alongside increasing rationalisation and the autonomisation of society from religious control, a host of religious organisations compete to sell their product. One major corollary of rationalisation and autonomisation is increasing worldliness, since religious organisations need to imitate those of modern societies in order to survive.

A further similarity between Berger and Luckmann is their emphasis upon the delegitimising aspects of religion generally, fuelled by the resultant pluralistic worldviews. In Berger's terms, worldliness and privatisation amount to an attenuation of the sacred, hence "a sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer, and eventually of the astronaut" (1969: pp. 112-113. See also 1979: pp. 43-89). Religious organisations are thereby compelled to become more 'this-worldly' in order to maintain their 'clients'. However, this assumption can be challenged. Other evidence discussed (Chapter 2), suggests that the churches most successful in maintaining and recruiting clients are the inverse; that is, the most lucrative are the evangelical branches which stand in stark distinction to more liberal and worldly churches. Their 'knowledge' base is less amenable to revision and challenge than their more liberal counterparts. This 'certainty' of doctrine and behaviour appears to appeal to many people.

By contrast, Wilson (1966) places secularisation against the backdrop of a transition from community to society (societalisation). Both rationalisation and bureaucratisation occur in tandem, accompanied by the rise of scientific (including social science) explanations of the world. Like the authors above, Wilson argues that religious

organisations are obliged to become increasingly worldly, and religion becomes pluralised.

The idea of rationalisation posits religion as irrational/immature juxtaposed against the rationality/maturity of post-Enlightenment thinking. This is analogous to an earlier theme – the evolutionary perception of children as irrational alongside the rational adult. This stance takes limited account of children as social actors, and “if children (and many adults) are to be respected, their rationality needs to be understood in richer ways than in the original purely intellectual meaning” (Alderson, 1995:69). A similar objection lends itself to the idea of religion as irrational – even mythical and animistic – contrasted spuriously with modernity as all that is rational.

#### **8.4      Ironic Reversals and Countervailing Tendencies?**

Against the secularisation perspectives above, authors such as Stark and Bainbridge, Finke, and Iannoccone develop their respective and collaborative theses in response, to the point of claiming that secularisation theories are wrong (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Finke, 1992; Stark and Iannoccone, 1994). Referring to Stark and Bainbridge:

In the future, as in the past, religion will be shaped by secular forces but not destroyed. There will always be a need for gods and for the general compensators that only they can plausibly offer. Unless science transforms humans into gods or annihilates humanity, people will continue to live lives hemmed by limitations. So long as we exist, we shall yearn for a bounty of specific rewards that in the mundane world are too scarce to be shed by all, and we shall ache for those general rewards of peace, immortality and boundless joy that have never been found this side of heaven. Secularization has unchained the

human spirit, not stifled it in a rationalized bureaucratic outbox (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985: 527-528).

Their arguments are not immune from criticism, however, and ultimately share a fundamental malady with other secularisation theorists, namely the disregard for individual non-church religiosity. Moreover, their arguments apply most stringently to North America.

The central Stark-Bainbridge position claims that secularisation increases choice in terms of religiosity and that religion can act as a compensator (from an alienating social structure), but it is rather more difficult to accept their conclusion that this choice has unchained the human spirit. Increased religious choice associated with secularisation has not allowed the human spirit to be *unchained*. One predicament is that contemporary societies are by their socially produced 'nature' increasingly bureaucratic, and aiming towards a qualified profit driven rationalism. This promotes feelings of alienation: from society, from nature, from others, and possibly even from an individual's self. This has culminated in so-called crises and uncertainties about such facets as the construction of knowledge (by whom and to what end?), risks (personal, local and global), and general (social) to more specific (individual) identity crises. This is why the human spirit can never be completely unchained, only loosened. Indeed, to borrow one of their own phrases, people *will* continue to live lives hemmed by limitations. We are not gods.

This research highlights some sense of religiosity as compensator amongst respondents. For instance, as an explanatory device for unresolved events, explaining death, and yearning for 'something else' beyond the material world. However, there does not appear to be any obvious evidence of freedom of the human spirit, unless this is mediated as extensive choice in individual belief. Moreover, how would we know what an unchained human spirit looks like? Certainly, we might expect an absence of psycho-social malaise and uncertainties at the very least.



Turning our attention back to Bruce, in response to the Stark argument he suggests that if it were the case that only religion could offer compensators in response to human needs, then there must be a market for new religions, given that the more traditional type is in decline. Both perspectives however, downplay the significance of individual religiosity, concentrating on institutional genres and so-called 'cult-type' religiosity in their arguments. In fact, individual's do not need to become a 'member' of a new religion to show evidence of seeking compensators evoked by supernatural means. Nor is it necessary for individual's to join a group in their quest for ontological security, or to offset some of the tensions associated with existential anxiety. Respondents grasp religiosity as a cultural resource to make sense of life and to deal with crises, without belonging to a religious group (see Chapters 5 and 6). Belonging is sought most amongst peer groups. We see this most acutely amongst some of the church-goers who go to great lengths to ensure that peers do not know about their beliefs, so as to avoid feelings of exclusion (see Chapter 7).

Yamone adds to the secularisation debate and argues that the analysis of religion from authors such as Stark, Bainbridge, and Iannoccone, in so far as it relates to apparently anomalous data in America (new religious movements), are unable to provide any evidence for trends over time (1997:111). Hadden (1987) however, takes their work more seriously as evidence of a rebuttal of secularisation theory, and doubts even whether the ideas of secularisation are related enough to form a theory. This can be challenged though, by referring again to the three core features explored by Bruce, and also to other eminent contributions to the field (discussed above). Indeed, Tschannen succinctly demonstrates that although secularisation theories often seem to feature more differences than similarities, the three cores or exemplars discussed above, actually refute this. Tschannen notes that differentiation or fragmentation is a central facet of all secularisation theories: at society's structural level, and also between the individual, institution and culture (1991:pp.404-405). Rationalisation can also be found across the respective theories, a characteristic of society rather than community, since the notion of society relates to a modern formulated framework of rationalised organisational



techniques. For example, society is dominated by instrumental values (Wilson, 1987:170). Worldliness or societalisation are similarly evident across the respective theories.

Fenn (1970) insists that the concept of secularisation primarily concerns delineation: what religion is, where its boundaries should be drawn, and by whom. As a contested sphere, conflict occurs between the clergy and the state primarily; though reversals of boundaries are always possible. Conflicting interpretations of religion are evident amongst philosophers, historians, and sociologists. Respondents in this study also demonstrate definitional conflicts (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Caution is advised in evaluating the claims of secularisation theorists, since there has *not* been a consistent claim that religion is necessarily in decline, as Stark is inclined to allege. Indeed, Casanova stresses that “the unassailable core of modern theories of secularisation”, is “the thesis of differentiation and emancipation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms”(1994:6). Casanova rejects the idea that as modernisation continues religion will necessarily decline. Here, he is allying himself with secularisation theorists, retaining the insights of the older paradigm, and re-emphasising the central argument that the orientation that people have to religious authority structures as an absolutely crucial variable.

Luckmann urges that religion is inextricably linked to being human. Opposition towards the overemphasis upon institutional forms of religion is central to his argument (1967:27). Like other secularisation theorists, Luckmann contends that as societies develop, religion becomes institutionalised, and that this eventually culminates in differentiation. A corollary of this is that other areas of social life relinquish their religious controls and religion loses some of its power. Concomitantly, an increasing plurality of worldviews results in an overall diminution of the plausibility of religious interpretations of the world. The consequence for religion is privatisation, whereby individual's are obliged to construct their own versions of the world. Religion becomes increasingly ‘this-worldly’ concerning itself with the ‘little’ transcendencies of life, and,

religious themes become generalised, functioning as 'invisible' religion. Analogously, Giddens supports the view that pluralism delegitimises religion, though argues simultaneously that religion is able to undergo a resurgence fuelled by the connection between modernity and doubt, since there are no longer any determinant authorities (1991: pp. 194-195).

In Luckmann's theory, a 'second order exemplar' is privatisation.<sup>183</sup> Individuals are obliged to shift between different spheres in their lives and have to construct their own identity, relying upon an internalised system of ultimate significance selected from an array of ultimate meanings (1967:99), a theme later developed by Giddens (1991).<sup>184</sup> As with Berger, so too with Luckmann: religious organisations have to cater to the psychological needs of clients. Rieff (1966) has argued similarly that when they do not, people may turn to various forms of therapy as a response to the social and moral malaise arising from modernity.<sup>185</sup>

For Luckmann, the modern world is not an irreligious world, but a world in which religion has become both privatised and also generalised under secular appearances. Indeed, individual autonomy allows the individual the space to construct her/his own system of ultimate significance. This perspective is similar to the position of Stark *et al.* They also present theories that cannot concede the disappearance of religion, premised upon their functionalist definitions. That is, religion will continue to co-exist alongside humanity, in various forms.

Whilst this entire thesis leans towards their position, the main difficulty here is that everything can be construed as religious. For example, Luckmann states that,

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<sup>183</sup> This is Tschannen's term and represents part of his attempt to systematise secularisation theories so as to identify a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense.

<sup>184</sup> For example, in Giddens' discussion of the self, he contends: "what to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. They are existential issues" (1991:71). Additionally, "The idea that each person has a unique character and special potentialities that may or may not be fulfilled is alien to pre-modern culture" (*ibid.*,74)

Religion is rooted in a basic anthropological fact: the transcendence of biological nature by human organisms. The individual human potential for transcendence is realised, originally, in social processes that rest on the reciprocity of face-to-face situations. These processes lead to the construction of objective world views, the articulation of sacred universes and, under certain circumstances, to institutional specialization of religion. The social forms of religion are thus based on what is, in a certain sense, an individual religious phenomenon: the individuation of consciousness and conscience in the matrix of human intersubjectivity (1967:69).

Some sociologists insist that this definition is too all-embracing, and invites easy criticism from authors such as Bruce, maintaining that phenomena such as football and nationalism can be considered religious from this perspective, catering to the same needs as conventional definitions of religion (1996:163). There is a problem with this though. Without attempting a fixed definition of religion, it is both necessary and sufficient to emphasise that a relation to the supernatural or transcendence distinguishes football from a more general religiosity. The integration of football into a meaning system, or to have faith in a team is not the same as belief in a Higher Power, nor does it entail the possibility of life after death. We have already discussed a strategy to offset seeing religion as suffusing all things in the family resemblance approach (see beginning of thesis).

A central feature of secularisation theories is the stress upon the *transformation* of religion in the modern world. To Bruce, it is the decline of the social significance of religion that is central, a stance similarly augmented by Chaves. Bruce maintains that the social significance of religion has diminished, whereas Stark and Iannoccone argue that religion has not declined to the extent suggested by other secularisation theorists, in North America at least. The debate about secularisation shows differences in terms of the timing and the content of religious change. Barker (1995), however, argues that in Britain, the scenario is one of pluralism and change as opposed to the terms of the main debate which focus upon decline or persistence. The data in this thesis confirms this trend.

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<sup>185</sup> This view has been promulgated by Rieff, as substitution for the consolation formerly provided by the church (Rieff, 1966:pp.34-35).

However, the argument that religiosity has few social consequences is contestable. Indeed, the social consequences are actually paradoxical. On the one hand, the social consequence of religiosity can be conservatism whereby informal religion, albeit individualised, fails to challenge capitalism. If capitalism is not challenged then it is provisionally supported. This conservatism and excessive focus upon the subjective self in privatised religiosity is consequential, since it equals passivity of purpose that culminates in the perpetuation of the existing social order. It is in this sense that modern forms of religiosity are functional for capitalism, and it is in this qualified sense that the eclectic and idiosyncratic forms of religiosity identified by Bruce, are in fact, socially consequential. But religiosity is not always a conservative force, as Castells demonstrates in his account of social movements resisting structural constraints (1997: pp. 12, 21-27).

Whilst we can agree in large measure with the religion as decline thesis in modern Britain, indices of decline apply most strongly and persistently to the situation of institutional Christianity. Moreover, as we have emphasised, measurements such as numbers in church are only one possible indicator of secularisation. In modern Britain, cultic and New Age practices may not exert a significant direct influence on many people's lives, but flanking these is a generalised interest and belief in supernatural referents. This is evidenced in mainstream sociological survey data. Problems in interpreting the meaning from such data can only be ameliorated by a more qualitative approach to establish the meaning of the beliefs to the people who hold them.

The implicit conflation of the decline of church with the decline of religion, and the notion that privatised religiosity is significantly declining and lacks social significance has been challenged in this thesis. When such beliefs actually support the social system, this is indeed consequential. Finally, the idea that an apparent rationalisation and a rational world are less conducive to religion has been objected to. The very idea of rationality applied to the modern production process is questionable. To the contrary, it

can be argued that in the context of capitalism, increasing rationalisation leads to increasing alienation and therefore fuels religiosity. Some of this is expressed in more obvious social forms, such as New Religious Movements, denominationalism and sects. The supernatural may have declined in scope for many people, but it is far from having been eroded. The forms of religion have altered in modern societies, like a windscreen shattering into many pieces, to borrow Bruce's own analogy (1996:234).

Whilst the religiosity that exists in the lives of the respondents does not imbue their worldviews with a sense of immediate community, there is an implicit sense of this-worldly morality (see responses on poverty, voluntary work, and nature for example). Herein lies the paradox. Whilst religiosity is reactionary, it is simultaneously potentially radical. The attitudes expressed by respondents towards social relationships, responsibilities, and environmental issues, portray a youth that is disaffected with the current state of the country and the world more generally. This disaffection may have the potential for collective mobilisation embodied in the notion that there must be more to material existence and mundane activities of daily living. These are the very feelings that have historically fuelled the motivation of collective resistance identity groups, and given the growth of modern communications, their impact is potentially huge. Individuals do possess agency as we saw in the chapter on identity. Dissatisfaction has, and still can, lead to action towards social change.

Whilst some young people continue to be both publicly and privately engaged with formal religious practises, others express less tangible elements of religiosity to varying degrees. This may be expressed through belief in the paranormal, apparent alien contact, superstition, and pondering ultimate questions with supernatural referents. Collectively, these may be described as common religion, a feature of spirituality, characterised by beliefs that are eclectic, idiosyncratic, and shared with others (Chapters 5 and 6).

Most of the time, however, religiosity resides in the background of people's lives, called upon as cultural resource in times of small and large-scale personal crises in an attempt to make sense of life and to exert some control. We have seen the ways in which some of the respondents refer to their religiosity (or aspects of spirituality and common religion), in order to derive meaning from existential issues and otherwise inexplicable events; or in an attempt to exercise some control over their lives. Indeed, the youth of modernity find themselves in difficult and perhaps historically peculiar social positions: lacking adult/full person status, which confers some access to power (albeit limited by gender and class in most cases), they occupy an ambiguous position in society. Clearly not 'children' any more, and lacking clear transitional roles and feelings of social worth, they nevertheless make attempts to construct their own identities within the boundaries before them. They illustrate some degree of agency insofar as we see them modifying and reconstituting shared values and meanings in ways that symbolise something to them. In terms of religiosity, their interpretation of Christianity is of an ideology whose teachings and values are out of line with their way of thinking and acting. The church in modern Scotland has indeed lost the scope and authority once wielded.

The claim throughout this text is that for some people, some of the time, there is a vibrant, eclectic world of religiosity behind the world of a declining institutional mode of Christianity. We can call this spirituality, since the term brings to the fore contemporary readings of religiosity, characterised by a sense of introspective otherness, experientiality, privatisation, and some concern for the environment and others. Secularisation theorists' (decline and persistence) accounts of the central features of secularisation are strong and compelling, but privatised religiosity is downplayed. This religiosity, or spirituality, perhaps represents less of an ironic reversal, or countervailing tendency in reaction to the decline of institutional religion. Rather, this may be something that has always existed to greater or lesser degrees in people's lives, at least as background noise.



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